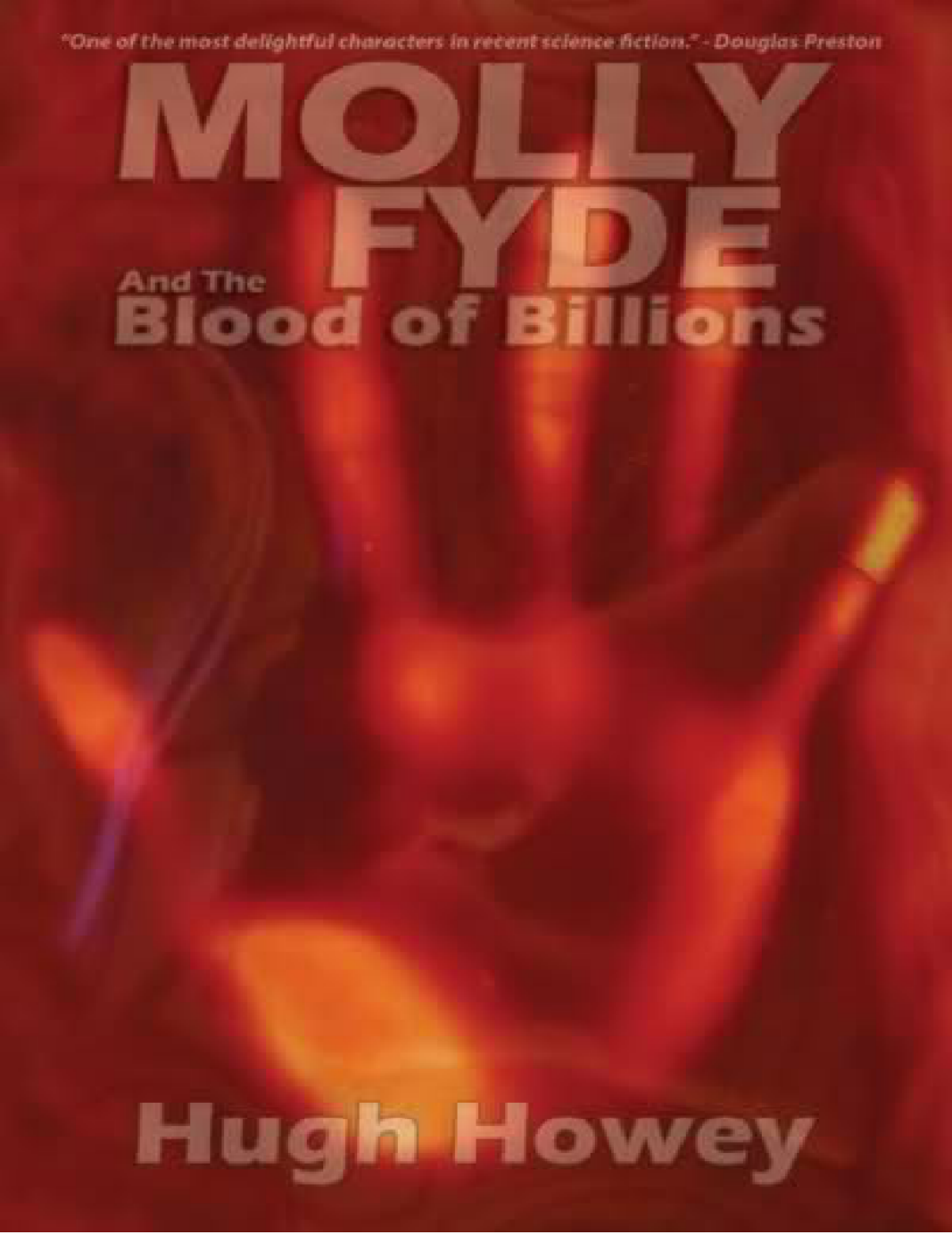
"One of the most delightful characters in recent science fiction." - Douglas Preston
MOLLY FYDE
And The Blood of Billions
Hugh Howey

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

It’s been ten years since Molly last set foot on her birth planet, and this isn’t how she’d imagined her homecoming. The sky is full of an invading fleet, one powerful enough to threaten the entire galaxy. The new family she has come to rely on—her crew of alien misfits and runaways—are scattered in three directions. As they struggle to reunite, events beyond their control seem to be driving more than just them apart: the universe itself may be torn asunder if the bond between these unlikely heroes is broken.

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MOLLY FYDE AND THE BLOOD OF BILLIONS
The Bern Saga: Book 3
by Hugh Howey

The Song of Sorrow

"A billion quests of almost, I've
seen, a countless number of nearly.
Wondrous sagas of might-have-been
wherein heroes paid, and dearly.

I could relate many a tale,
brutal, believable, and dreary. But
who cares to hear of those who fail: the
sputtering, the sad, the weary?

The following, then, is no coincidence,
not good fortune, nor blessed timing.
It is naught but sad recompense
for those billion others…
…dying."

~The Bern Seer~

Prologue: The Land of Light

"Only time—that plodding mute—will tell.

And only the blind will see it coming."

~The Bern Seer~

0

The cabin is small and old, a hasty jumble of overlapping wood planks rattling on rusty nails. It appears more outpost than residence, like a shelter built for a specific purpose in a rugged land, then abandoned and forgotten. Something itinerant hunters might squat in for a night or two, but certainly not what it actually is: a permanent home.

The poor structure bucks and sways as it races along at the edge of time. Now and then, it shudders mightily, responding to some major happening in the universe. Oh, and the noises it makes! Below the rotting joists, a dozen axles grind, groan, and wail in their ungreased housings. The overall effect is a symphony of decrepit sounds—decay and dilapidation in aural motion. It sings the song of things built long ago and in dire need of upkeep; it's the peal and complaint of a slow dying, like an orchestra of the ancient. And it's all paced by its perpetual rhythm section: the steady patter of rain beating on dented tin.

A sheet of the simple metal covers the cabin's forward wall as well as its roof. Forward is where the rain comes from. It doesn't fall; it flies in with the eternal stream of photons parallel to the ground, hammering the thin metal incessantly. Coupled with the sound of the jostling, the groaning axles, and the creaking boards, the pounding rain allows sleep to come easily and linger a while. For the cabin's sole occupant, it makes getting up a daily measure of her will. But the good thing—perhaps the *only* benefit that comes with living on the edge of time—is that one can never be considered "late" to anything. The lady inside the cabin stirs when she feels like it, which always makes it just the right time:

Morning.

And the start of her routine.

First comes the pointless blinking, followed by some stretching as old joints pop and creak in time with the loose flooring. Eventually, she peels her single bed sheet back like the skin of an overripe pod, revealing the shriveled bean of a woman within.

Legs, thin as saplings yet rough like old wood, swing out. They find the floor and test it. They test *themselves*. The woman rests her reedy hands on her sharp knees and somehow by pushing down on one part of her body, she helps raise the rest.

Groaning, her back full of aches no stretching nor rubbing could ever reach, she staggers toward the sound of water drip-dripping in a nearby barrel. The cabin sways slightly, and the woman's hands fly out for balance. Old knees bend and hips shift as she dances alone to

gravity's tune. It feels like a fast day outside, which means a lot is happening in the universe. Still, there isn't any rush. Things will occur whether or not she's there to witness them.

The old woman shuffles to the barrel and grasps its rim to steady herself. A collection of hoses lead back from the forward gutters to keep the container full, enough so that another series of tubes can take the overflow and deliver it to the animals out back. Feeling for the ladle hooked to one side, she brings a few deep gulps to her lips and then wipes her narrow chin. With another dip, she fills a shallow pan and rubs some of the cool wetness on her face, refreshing herself and waking up just a tiny bit more.

The woman next moves to the sagging pantry and considers its contents. Suddenly, the shack sways to one side. A hammock of fruit loses its tempo and swings wildly, one of the brass hooks it hangs from squealing against the wood. The old lady clutches the counter and waits for the occurrence to recede into the past, further up the surface of her cone-shaped land.

As she stands there, some old memory brushes against her. It elicits a smile, even as she gropes for the details. But the recollection escapes, losing itself among countless others. It becomes a part of the faceless crowd that haunts her: another ephemeral ghost of some past adventure on a distant planet whose name she has long forgotten.

She isn't senile. Not yet. She's just bumped against the capacity of the human brain to remember. So many years have passed and so much has been seen that not all of it can fit. As the new and more recent come in, the old memories are pushed down, compacted away somewhere deep, somewhere she can't reach. But they can still reach *her*, sparking emotions devoid of details.

Such moments seem to occur more regularly of late and always without warning. It feels invasive, as though bad things creep into her mind unannounced. She thinks of them as these twin burglars: Déjà-Vu and Nostalgia, who steal through her thoughts, rummage through her old memories, and leave behind a mess of feelings.

Sometimes, rare though it may be, they even uncover good ones. They somehow stir up a pleasant sensation amid the clutter, freeing it to swirl up into her consciousness. Such as this one: a recollection warm and dry with a hint of companionship. Someone laughing, perhaps. Possibly even her—

It passes and her smile fades; all traces of the event recede with whatever triggered the feeling, chased back into the past where it was made and still belongs.

The woman sighs and reaches for her mixing bowl. With a heavy heart, she taps in some flour ground from a mixture of alien grasses. A buttery paste is cut in next, then one of the fruits from the hammock,

finely diced. Strapping her iron skillet above the hole in the counter, she bends down and fiddles with the lens below.

Through a small glass window in the tin wall—low down and behind the counter—a violent stream of photons enters the cabin. The rays of harsh light pass through a series of filters before slamming into the bulging lenses. They bend through them, curving and condensing, sliding and squeezing together before mirrors divert them up toward the hole in the counter. There, the powerful and focused beam of light strikes the bottom of the iron skillet with all the force of a laser, and the cabin fills with the aroma of hot oil.

The concoction goes from the mixing bowl to the skillet, and old hands work fast, stirring it to heat evenly. When it smells just right, she blocks off the light and spoons the mixture onto the counter. It's still piping hot, but her old hands hardly notice; what nerves remain have become calloused with more time and tragedy than they were built for. Now they're lucky to feel anything, even a burn.

While she shapes the treats with her palms, she listens to the rain ahead of her pepper the tin, roaring in occasional, thick sheets. The density of the sound makes her anxious to get out there and see what's going on. Something about the day feels unusual. Momentous. She pops one of the plump morsels in her mouth, preferring them fresh and hot, and chews while her curiosity swells. She puts the rest of the dumplings in her old basket and hangs its woven handle in the crook of her arm. Turning, she moves to the solitary door at the rear of the shack, pushes it open, and steps out onto the small porch beyond. As she shuts the door, her home hits another large happening, and everything lurches to one side. Steadying herself, she cringes at the sound of things rustling and banging together inside her tiny home. When things move *too* far, it takes her a good while to find them again.

Securing the basket, she crosses the narrow porch toward the thundering sounds emanating nearby: the deep and faithful roar of six Theryls, galloping in their tireless way. She opens the small gate in the middle of the porch and moves out onto the gangway leading down the center of the harnessed team, three of the majestic beasts to a side.

Boo comes first, a habit she rationalizes as mere routine, but he really is her favorite; they've had too many adventures together to help from loving him more. The animal's head swings over to nuzzle her, his nose like cold sandpaper brushing below her ear. Before she can even get the treat out of the basket, her old friend takes it from her, his coarse tongue scratching her palm. She slaps his neck fondly, and Boo squeals with delight, sounding like one of the worn axles below her feet.

Continuing down the tight boardwalk, she feeds each of the team

members in turn, and they take their food and eat without breaking step. There's more than enough calories in the bits of mysterious fruit to keep them galloping along for what she likes to consider a day. Another round of dumplings tomorrow will keep them going for *that* day, and so on and forever. Coupled with the overflow of water sloshing in the troughs ahead of each animal, the Theryls remain well-nourished, if over-worked.

She thanks each of them in turn and wishes them well before feeling her way back to the porch. Turning right, she moves between the two old trunks that face each other. The woman lowers herself to one—the one she never opens—and lifts the lid on the other. She places the basket inside and pulls out the old flightsuit, neatly folded. First, she shakes it out in front of her, feeling for the zipper, and then she works it over her thin legs.

The suit has plenty of room to spare, more with each passing day, it seems. She forces her stiff arms back and into the sleeves, then zips up the front. Next, she pulls out the old helmet. Her fingers brush over a dent; their wrinkled pads come across a deep scrape repaired with epoxy long ago, and those twin robbers return, tossing through her past and forcing her to gasp for air.

She remains still for a moment, only her hand moving as it rubs the smooth visor. Eventually, she remembers where she is. Reaching inside, she makes sure the red band is arranged just so—the seam in the back. The shell comes down over her head, the fit still nice and snug. She tucks her longish, wispy hair down into the collar of her flightsuit before locking the helmet into place.

The world outside falls pleasantly silent, reminding her of the vacuum of space. She enjoys the sensation for a moment before standing and pushing the side gate open. Keeping a grip on the rail, she steps out into the horizontal rain and works her way toward the front of the shack, the water droplets pelting her with more force than usual. They pop up and down her suit like gunfire, tingling and tickling. Now and then, a large drop explodes against her visor with a sharp crack. She ducks her head and pushes into it, her curiosity swelling even further.

At the front of her shack, she turns to follow the porch around the wall of tin and crouches down where the rail splits. Ahead of her, sticking out beyond the forwardmost axle of her home, lies a curved wooden frame covered in slick leather, like a saddle for her entire body. With practiced ease, she stretches out and slides across the wet surface, grasping the metal handles at the far edge.

Pulling herself into place, she wiggles until she feels comfortable enough to endure the unmoving hours. Once she's perfectly settled, she gropes for the seeing-device mounted in front of her and makes a

few adjustments. Lying on her belly at the front of her speeding cabin, she imagines she looks like a mermaid carved onto the prow of a ship, or a figurehead for some strange procession. She smiles and lifts her visor, the rain glancing off her back as she brings the old scope close to her helmet. Pressing the seeing-cups to her eyes, she lowers her chin to keep most of the driving rain out and blinks several times, her lashes whisking across the lenses they are so close.

With the cover on the front of the device closed, her world continues to be as pitch-black as ever to her blinded eyes. The irony of it all never gets old to her: she lives in a place called the Land of Light and can't see a thing. Can't, that is, unless she stares right into the source of it all: the singularity at the end of her cone-shaped world. It's the point in hyperspace through which all photons in the universe flow. Through which all *time* moves.

The shack shudders again; she squeezes the saddle with her knees as it passes. On the other side of the cabin, the Theryls do a noble job of keeping her home in place, holding it against the inevitable slide back into the past. They toil while she watches. That's their existence, hers and the animals'. It's their lives at the edge of hyperspace: a daily vigil into all events, some of which have not yet happened. Her task is to sort through them, looking for the bad things, warning of them cryptically lest someone abuse the knowledge, lest things happen *before* they should.

Mostly, though, she remains on watch for the worst things she's foretold, things she predicted long, long ago. She continues to observe, looking for any sign of them and hoping to be daily disappointed.

Rain streaks off the scope and flies back inside her helmet, a torment she has grown used to. The small drops gather forces, forming rivulets. They march in columns through her flightsuit, down her nakedness underneath and out the holes she'd cut in the bottom of the suit's feet. She holds her eyes tight to the cups as she opens the cover at the end of the cylinder, letting the compressed photons slide through the tubes and their narrow slits.

Inside the device, quanta of time and light do remarkable things. Approaching the side-by-side slits, the particles multiply, dividing and reproducing in order to pass through every gap, obeying simple but strange laws of physics. On the other side of the filter—before the photons can coalesce and continue their journey as one—they are interrupted by the woman's eyes. They bombard her blind orbs while they're still split apart, and thereby reveal their inner mysteries.

The woman blinks reflexively, even though her ocular nerves no longer function properly. The visions that fill her head can be seen even with her lids closed. The sights move like neutrinos, boring straight through her skull and leaving hazy images behind. She sees

visions of reflected events, of some things long-ago, and many things that have not yet happened.

Not *yet.*

She focuses on the day's images while another bump rocks the cabin, the shudder followed by a sheet of thick rain. The woman watches the images blur together. The visions are like overlapping transparencies; bringing just one layer into focus requires a force of will, a practiced bit of mental gymnastics. It feels as if she must squeeze her concentration like a muscle.

The visuals shimmy before forming into solid pictures, confusing at first. They're large and jarring, hitting her like a bump in time.

Her head comes away from the seeing device with a start, her lids blinking across brown eyes with their yellow starbursts at the center. She leans forward and peers into the light once again, wary from the many false positives she's been fooled by in the past, the many strange things that always end up being nothing. Or at the very least, a different *sort* of something.

She studies the images intently, focusing her perception, needing to make sure… but there isn't any doubt:

The Bern.

Thousands and thousands of ships, some of them carrying hundreds of smaller ships, are arranged in a grid for battle; they're jumping into her land from a dozen different galaxies. She sees them crossing through hyperspace before forming up in the midlands—that part of the sideways cone where the snow flies. She sees them preparing to invade the Milky Way, sees them sliding through an open rift and out over a dry and dusty land. She sees death and destruction on a scale the universe normally reserves for the *ends* of time.

The old woman waits for the scene to change, for any indication that this is the future, but it remains solid. Unwavering. And in a land where things happened out of sequence, where cause and effect have to be re-learned, where it's often impossible to distinguish what happened and in what order, she sees quite clearly that this has *already* begun.

"Mortimor!" she thinks. She focuses the word into the red band, sending it out to all the other paired bands, the devices that can intercept even the softest of thoughts through hyperspace and beyond.

"Pops, can you hear me?"

She waits.

If he can hear her, he doesn't think it. The red band remains silent.

And so the woman known as the Bern Seer lies motionless on her leather saddle, zipping along just before the very edge of time. Ahead of her, a scene she once glimpsed with blind eyes plays out yet again,

only clearer this time. The frightening visuals dominate her senses, downing out the other events taking place elsewhere. She's left with only the Bern to watch.

And a lifetime of doubts, an eon of fears that she had seen incorrectly, or had started a panic over some fleeting dream, gradually washes away. Those old worries regarding her senility are driven off by a flood of the *now*. A flood of horror.

Countless years she has endured, waiting, living with the anxiety of having possibly been wrong.

And suffering the even worse terror that she may have been right.

Part XI – Worlds Apart

“It isn’t the distance that tears—it’s what’s stretched between.”

~The Bern Seer~

1

"My name is Mortimor Fyde, son. Welcome to hyperspace."

"Hello," Cole asked out loud, "is anyone there?"

He shook his head. His thoughts were still rattled from the crash landing, his vision partially blinded from the harsh light outside. He knelt on the buried canopy of the stolen and upturned Firehawk and groped for the strange voices he thought he'd heard during the crash.

It was nearly impossible to concentrate, however, with someone else trying to yell at him. Riggs, his former Academy mate and friend, hung overhead, strapped to the nav chair, completely restrained. Cole could see the whites of his eyes glaring down at him, his cheeks puffing out around the tape, his nostrils flaring with rapid, shallow breaths. In the dull, green glow of the emergency lightstick, Riggs's angered visage seemed outright menacing, like a monster eager to attack. He grunted more unpleasantries through the tape and shook his head side to side, his eyes squinting with rage.

"Okay, hold on," Cole said. He stood and reached for a corner of the tape. "Stop struggling."

Riggs held still, but his eyes tunneled straight through Cole. The tape came off with a loud ripping sound, followed by a bout of cursing.

"You *flanker!*" Riggs yelled. "What in hyperspace have you *done?*" He shook his shoulders, struggling against the restraints and the flight harness.

The sight of Riggs's bound arms made Cole wince with guilt. Tying him up had been necessary during his and Molly's escape from the Navy, but after the brutal crash they'd just endured, the bindings seemed cruel and pointless.

"Cool your jets," said Cole. "I'm just as confused as you are." He touched the red band on his forehead, thinking as loud as he could, but the voices had gone silent. He took the Drenard invention off and held the lightstick close to check that the seam was in the back—

"Why're we upside down?" Riggs yelled. "What've you done? Get me out of here, Cole, I *mean* it."

"Okay, okay, just save the air. There's atmosphere here, but I don't know what's in it." Cole stuffed the band in his breast pocket and reached up to undo the restraints around his old friend's elbows and hands. "Don't get crazy, okay? I'm gonna untie you."

As soon as one of Riggs's hands came free, he slapped Cole's away and worked on the other strap himself. "Where in hyperspace did you *take* us?"

“Funny you should ask like that.” Cole watched Riggs fumble with his harness; he jumped aside just in time. Riggs landed on the inverted canopy with a thud and a crunch.

Cole went to help him up. “If my sources are… well, unless I’m hearing things, we might be in—”

Before he could finish, Riggs was on top of him, swinging wild blows with his fisted flight gloves.

“Stop it!” Cole yelled. He grabbed one of Riggs’s arms after a blow grazed the side of his head. Pulling down on the arm, he twisted his body and tossed Riggs over his hip. Riggs spun and landed with his back against the glass canopy; Cole fell on top of him, spreading his weight out to hold his old friend in place.

“Stop,” he said again as he groped for the lightstick. It had rolled beneath them, reducing the glow to almost nothing.

Riggs panted hard in the darkness; he twisted his shoulders and hips in an attempt to buck Cole off.

“Listen to me—”

“Flank you.”

“Seriously, Riggs, listen. Hold still—”

“Get the flank off me!”

“Okay, I’m getting off, but no blows. Just relax for a second.”

He got off Riggs and backed to one side of the upturned cockpit. Riggs scrambled away, grabbing the lightstick as he went and holding it out between them.

Cole showed his palms and tried to imagine how his old friend must see him: some mad vigilante—a dangerous criminal. There was the theft of *Parsona*, the death of Admiral Lucin, and what had happened on Palan during the floods. He knew none of it looked good, especially the recent act of kidnapping Riggs and escaping from the Navy, which he couldn’t even begin to deny.

“Hey,” Cole said. “I’m not gonna try and convince you I’m innocent—”

“Good,” spat Riggs.

“I’m not even gonna ask you to put aside your hatred of me—”

“Trust me, I won’t.”

“Fine. But unless I’m hearing voices, we need to get out of here, which means working *together* if you wanna stay alive long enough to kill me yourself.”

Riggs seemed to consider the logic behind that. “Yeah. Fine,” he said. He waved the lightstick around the cockpit, taking in the scene of the crash. “As long as you understand, I’m gonna do that as soon as possible.”

“But not right now?”

“Probably not,” Riggs said, glaring at him. “So, where are we?”

Cole wondered how to break the news, or if he was just being delusional. He felt for the red band in his breast pocket as the illumination from the lightstick faded, leaving them in complete darkness.

"Damn," Riggs said. "My eyesight's screwed."

"Mine too," said Cole. The large spot in his vision had broken up, replaced with a dozen smaller dots that danced around like flying, glowing creatures. He hoped the change was a good sign—the searing light they'd encountered upon arrival seemed powerful enough to do permanent damage.

"These things suck," Riggs said, banging the lightstick against the canopy. Cole could hear him cracking it back and forth to get a bit more glow out of it.

"It was in my suit, the one from *Parsona*. It's an old design. The Naval emergency kits are under out seats, we need—"

"I know where the kits are, you Drenard. This is *my* ship and I stowed them there."

"Jeez, okay, then help me get them down. We need the—"

"The biosticks, yeah. Tell you what, Cole, let's agree I outrank you so you can stop pretending you're in charge here."

Cole watched a dark silhouette fumble near one of the hanging seats.

"I'm a captain," Riggs continued, "and you're not even a navigator anymore."

"Drop the Navy crap," Cole said. "It means nothing right now."

One of the emergency kits fell to the glass. Riggs pushed past Cole and started unstrapping the other one. "To *you*, maybe, but just because the Navy dropped *you* doesn't mean *I* need to drop the Navy *crap*."

Cole reached into the soft case and felt for the cylindrical biosticks; they would last a lot longer than the older lightsticks from whatever era Molly's parents had salvaged them from. He gave one of them a half-twist, lining up the two inner chambers with each other. The cockpit filled with a soft, blue glow as bioluminescent creatures came out of hibernation and began to feed.

Cole held up the stick—and the first thing he saw in the new glow was Riggs turning to punch him in the nose.

New flashes of light sparked in his vision to join the dull, persistent ones. Cole threw his hands up to fend off the next attack, but it didn't come.

"*That's* for tying my ass up," Riggs said. "When I kill you later, it'll be for what you did to Lucin."

Cole didn't dare defend himself and get that argument raging again. Besides, he *had* shot their old Academy instructor in the back.

No point in trying to explain *why*. He reached up and felt his nose. It was sore, but not broken. Pulling his hand away, he saw he wasn't bleeding, either, just stunned.

The ambient blue light doubled in intensity as Riggs pulled a second biostick from the other kit and activated it. Cole nearly chastised him for not rationing the supplies, but the lines in Riggs's brow suggested it might be a bad idea. Instead, Cole peered down at the canopy, their only exit. The entire bubble of glass was buried in the ground, blocking off the crazy light outside, but also their chance of escape. Cole couldn't believe the carboglass had held. If that was solid ground they'd hit, the entire nose should've crumpled up around them. He lowered the biostick toward the glass, but he couldn't see anything through the cockpit—just a dark mass pressing against the clear shield.

"Is there any point in trying to slide the canopy back?" Cole asked.

"Only if it kills you before it kills me."

Cole swung his biostick around to illuminate the space between them. He studied Riggs's face intently. "Listen, man, I'm serious. We need to put this aside and *think*. Be rational."

"Fine." Riggs looked around the cockpit, and Cole did the same. The two flight seats hung overhead, and the canopy rose up to the inverted dash, where every control was blank and dark. At the rear of the cockpit stood the flat wall separating the crew from the flight systems: the life-support, engines, and hyperdrive.

"The landing gear," Riggs suggested.

"Yeah? What about them?"

"Did you lower them?"

"No. Why? What are you thinking?"

Riggs pointed with his biostick toward the metal panel bolted aft of the seats. "We go out through the landing gear shafts. There's a maintenance tunnel that runs the length of the ship big enough for the grease monkeys to crawl through. We just need to unscrew that panel —" Riggs fumbled in his kit. "Should be a multi-tool in here."

"Good thinking."

"Thanks," Riggs said. "It isn't something you can learn from a simulator. Hell, if you hadn't tied me up, I betcha I could've landed this thing with my left hand."

Cole bit down on what he wanted to say; there was no room in the tight confines of their predicament for making Riggs angrier. He'd rather take more blows right on his nose and keep smiling, wearing out Riggs's rage with a bit of patience.

"Lower the gear with the manual crank while I work on the panel," Riggs instructed.

“Okay,” Cole said, as pleasantly as he could muster his voice. If they were going to survive this together, he was going to have to build up some trust.

He would start by carefully and meticulously restraining *himself* for a change.

2

Following her controversial speech before the Circle, Anlyn travels to the Great Rift, accompanied by Edison and an escort of volunteers.

They hope to be present for the invasion foretold by prophecy.

They don't yet know they are at the wrong rift.

"What are you *doing*?" Rend asked. He yanked Dor's hand away from the weapons rack.

"I was just going to touch it!" Dor insisted.

"Are you crazy?" Rend eyed the lance warily. The large weapon stood upright in a padded harness parallel to a dozen others. It rested there as if it were no different than its neighbors, but he knew better. "That's Lord Campton's lance," he said in a hushed whisper, never taking his eyes off it. "The Lance of a Thousand Suns."

"A thousand suns? That's ridiculous."

"Well, I heard it was forged from the magma of Hori I and Hori II and pounded into shape on the coldest corner of Drenard's dark side."

Dor narrowed his eyes. "Those are fairy tales, like flying Wadi. How old are you?"

"Same age as you, hot-head, but my dad was there when the lance was wielded for the first time. He said it went off with the power of a thousand suns, and that it made a noise like the universe coming alive."

"Your dad's been in the Wadi juice, sounds like."

"No he hasn't, my dad—"

Anlyn cleared her throat behind the bickering boys before the argument could get personal. The volunteer peacemakers spun around, and she took as much pleasure in their shocked expressions as she had amusement in their whispered delusions.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked.

"Princess Hooo," Rend said—

"*Lady* Hooo," Dor whispered, elbowing his friend. He shrugged for Anlyn, as if he couldn't be held responsible for his crewmate's imprecise knowledge of royal etiquette.

"I'm sorry, *Lady* Hooo," Rend said, "I forget you're engaged. We were just talking about Lord Campton and his lance. My father was there for the speech. He saw—well…" The poor kid glanced at the lance, seemingly miserable with nerves. His hands squeezed fistfuls of his outer tunic as he fidgeted in place.

Anlyn gave each of the boys a serious look as she walked around them and approached the weapons rack. She rested a hand reverently on Edison's lance. "It belonged to one of my uncles," she said. She

turned to Rend and Dor. “A guard once used it to cut a friend of mine in two. Lord Campton later turned it into a symbol of *peace*, not war.”

“Told you,” Dor said to Rend.

Rend ignored him. “I heard it was *you* who used it in the Pinnacle, that the great speech came about because of…” Rend gazed at the lance.

Anlyn could sense he wanted to touch it. She pressed the pad of her finger to the security harness and the clamps clacked open. Pulling it from the rack, she turned around and held it out to the two lads.

Dor reached for it eagerly. Rend grasped the other half as if the lance were as fragile as Thooo eggs.

“Don’t touch the trigger,” she warned them.

Neither boy looked up; they just nodded and turned the large device over and over, inspecting the royal markings and the electrical modifications Edison had made. Rend ran his hand down to the Wadi hook on the one end while Dor tested the point on the other side with a cautious finger.

“I would let you inspect it further,” Anlyn said, “but I actually came to retrieve it before our meeting with the Rift Commander.”

“It was an honor, Lady Hooo,” Rend said. He pulled the lance away from Dor and extended it to her. “I would love to speak with you sometime, perhaps hear more of your interpretations of the prophecy.”

“I would enjoy that as well, peacemaker. And it would please me to hear *your* interpretation. Now, return to your duties. There will be time enough to gossip while we wait for the prophecy’s fulfillment. For all we know, we may have years together for swapping tales.”

Both boys smiled and bowed low, pulling their outer cloaks up to their chins. Anlyn returned the gesture with one hand, touching the deck with the tip of the lance as she did so. She then moved off in the direction of the embassy ship’s cockpit, smiling to herself.

Behind her, she could hear one of the boys whispering excitedly. Something about “a thousand suns” and “Wadi queens.”

••••

Anlyn kept the end of the Wadi lance just off the deck as she made her way to the cockpit. Several crewmembers and peacemakers greeted her as she passed, bowing low and grasping the edges of their tunics. Anlyn returned the stiff formalities, but all the time-consuming ceremony just heightening her eagerness to join Edison near the bow of the ship. She felt herself hurrying, *needing* to be near him. She passed through the narrow communications room and crossed the

staff corridor, pausing to wave to the off-duty crew dining in the officer's mess. She then turned toward the nose of the large starship and hurried down the wide central passageway. As she went through the last sliding door, she found Edison waiting for her just outside the cockpit, mindful as always of her fear of going inside.

"Pleasant awakenings," Edison said, greeting her in his thick, growling English.

Anlyn stepped into his embrace. Her head rested against his belly, her Glemot lover a full meter taller than she.

"Pleasant awakenings to you," she cooed. She wrapped one arm as far around him as she could and remained there, taking deep breaths. Of all the things she missed about her time aboard *Parsona*—excepting Molly's and Cole's company, of course—she most regretted no longer being able to sleep on Edison's chest, warm and safe. Now that they were back among her people and Counselors of the Circle, certain decorum had to be observed.

They had planned on marrying, on making their union official, but had promised Molly and Cole they wouldn't do so until they were all back together. That impulsive and sincere vow had now created the distinct possibility that the marriage would *never* occur, but they had decided to respect the wishes of their friends. And—as Edison had once put it in his awkward English—they would respect "her culture's non-optimal stance on betrothal co-habitation."

Anlyn pulled away from him and gazed up at the silky coat of fur sticking out of his tunics and at the intelligent, bright eyes below his strong brow. She patted his arm and glanced into the cockpit. "Are we there yet?" she asked, unable to see anything over the flight crew, as everything in the ship was built for the height of a Drenard male.

"Approximately," Edison said. "I have a visual." He looked down at his lance, which Anlyn held with one hand. "Will that be required?"

"No, but it does carry a certain mystique, which may help."

Edison frowned.

"I know how you feel about the prophecy stuff, but we've gotten quite far on superstition, so wield it as if you *believe*." She handed him the lance. "Are you ready?"

Edison grunted. "Approximately."

Anlyn smiled. She thanked the flight crew without stepping inside, then the two of them turned and set off for the airlock. Once again, the walk was punctuated with bows and raised tunics. Anlyn fought the urge to politely wave them along; she participated in each ritual as she attempted to build solidarity amongst her crew. With Dani's help, she had hand-picked each crewmember from a legion of volunteers. They had initially thought it would be impossible to find a full ambassadorial complement to accompany her to the Great Rift,

but the opposite problem had occurred: so *many* believers of the Bern Prophecy had shown up that most had to be turned away. And—instead of looking for the *few* faithful—they had found themselves weeding out the truly fanatic, searching among them for the rare moderate and temperate heads.

A second and larger worry had arisen during their selection process: sniffing for the moles her ex-fiancée Bodi had attempted to plant within the mission. It wasn't a question of whether some had made it through, but how many.

And what they had planned.

••••

For security reasons, the embassy ship was not allowed to couple with the Rift Keep. A shuttle met them several hundred kilometers out and ferried them to the command corner of the great structure: a small outpost kept separate from the living and business sectors, accessible only by ship.

Anlyn and Edison admired the Keep from their padded seats as the shuttle pilot transferred them over. Like other defensive keeps from the histories of so many races, its position had been determined by tactical necessity. Of course, where most keeps of old were placed on high overlooks, along critical waterways, or by the mouths of important Wadi canyons, the Great Keep stood in the middle of nowhere, out in the vast expanse of empty space. Because that's precisely where the Bern Rift had been discovered so many eons ago.

"Approximate its diameter," Edison said, peering through the glass.

Anlyn looked out her porthole at the Keep, even though she knew the answer by heart. The scaffolding of the structure formed a mesh of metal, like a giant cage hanging in the vacuum of space. Ribbons of steel crisscrossed from one side to the other, creating a tangle of obstructing debris around the tear. It looked like something in mid-construction, but it had been completed many Hori cycles ago.

"It's just over a thousand kilometers across," she told Edison.

He grunted, obviously impressed.

Anlyn turned to him and smiled; it wasn't often she saw him in awe of Drenard-built things. The sensation filled her with pride for her race, even as the reason for having constructed the Great Keep gave her a shiver of fear.

"And central to the structure?" Edison put a claw against the glass, pointing toward the occasional flash of golden light emanating from within the keep.

“The stuff in the middle? That’s the armored cube right across the tear. If you think of the cosmos as having a wound, *that’s* the bandage.”

“Increase specificity,” Edison said, reminding Anlyn just who she was dumbing things down for. She rooted around in her childhood studies, then recited in a sing-song manner:

“It’s saturated fluoroalkane in gold alloy armored canisters. The fluorine and carbon are bonded together, making them extremely inert, therefore hard to demolish from the other side.” She took a deep breath. “Still, the Bern do find ways to destroy it now and then. It’s a constant battle to keep enough in place that nothing gets through.”

Edison turned and looked toward the cockpit of the shuttle. His brows were down, his eyes unfocused.

Anlyn smiled at him. “Oh, my. Did I just get too technical for you?”

“Hmm?” He turned to her. “No, I lapsed into ruminations. What prevents the Bern from employing a Birch reduction using electride salts? The ejected anion would destabilize the bond, resulting in one-four cyclohexadienes. Reacting through the rift on such a solution would be elementary, especially considering the electrical conductance of the golden vessels.”

Anlyn shook her head. “Do *what?*”

“A Birch reduction. Using electride—”

“No, no.” Anlyn waved her arms. “Forget it. Look, talk to some of the physicists about—”

“Chemists,” Edison corrected.

“Okay, talk to the chemists about that. The point is, the stuff works. Mostly.”

“*Mostly?* Elaborate further.”

“Well—”

Before she could *elaborate further*, telling him about the frequent escapes and the methods used to chase blockade runners down, the shuttle thumped against the locking collar of the Keep and it was time to depart. One of the flight crew exited the cockpit and opened a hatch forward of them. He bowed and waved them through as Edison and Anlyn left their seats and approached the door.

“Thank you,” Anlyn said, as much for rescuing her from the conversation as for the flight. She bowed and then stepped out of the shuttle and into one of the many connecting tubes ringing the Great Rift Keep. Through the transparent passage, she could see the vast network of visisteel corridors stretching out for hundreds of kilometers in every direction. They converged on each other like a Drenard freeway, further than the eye could see. Several shuttles buzzed along the perimeter, their hulls twinkling with navigation lights as they

ferried workers from one part of the Keep to another.

Strolling down the passageway to greet them was Lord Bishar Nooo, the Commander of the Keep. Anlyn recognized him more by his elaborate tunics than his face. They were family—as she could tell by his outermost layers—but they had never actually met.

"Anlyn Hooo," he said in greeting, using her common name. He bent over and embraced her fondly. "You must be Edison," he said, showing his palms and bowing, his eyes darting to the lance held by the Glemot's side. "Pleased to have you both."

"*Are* you?" Anlyn asked. "I'd heard you weren't amused with our mission."

Bishar smiled. "Let's walk," he said, waving them along the tube. A dozen meters or so from the locking collar, the passage opened into the command center, the military heart of the Keep.

Anlyn followed, looking down at the grav panels visible in the floor of the visisteel tube. They not only provided physical weight, they also seemed to manufacture psychological comfort. She didn't suppose it would feel pleasant to walk across solid visisteel and nothing else, not with the cosmos hanging on all sides.

"Unsuitable for agoraphobics," Edison mused in English, obviously thinking the same thing.

"What was that?" Bishar asked, turning to face them.

"My betrothed said this place would be unpleasant for people frightened by open places."

Bishar laughed. "Without question. Our job, though, is one of constant vigilance. There are outbreaks now and then, and every staff member carries a warning device and possesses a keen eye." He patted the small object hanging around his neck, nestled in the folds of his outer tunic. "The visisteel makes sure nothing is missed, and a battalion of Interceptors are always on standby, ready and alert."

"A full battalion? Even with the extermination of the Humans underway?"

Bishar frowned. "Let's not call it an 'extermination,' shall we? It will mean an end to the hostilities in the rest of the galaxy, which will eventually make our job here that much easier. Until then, there will be some cutbacks, of course, and some pilots taking extra shifts. Come, step inside."

Bishar waved them through a set of clear blast doors and into a room full of manned consoles glittering with purposeful lights. The walls, ceiling, and most of the floor were transparent, creating an uncanny scene of hovering workspaces amid a backdrop of stars, nebulae, and woven strips of steel.

"Cutbacks?" Anlyn asked, pressing the point home. She watched as Edison wandered to one of the control booths and peered over an

operator's shoulder, probably figuring out how to rebuild the entire machine from twigs and grasses if he had to.

Bishar looked down at her, frowning. Like Edison, he was nearly a full meter taller than her and he stood close by, as was the habit of Drenard males. Also habitual was the intimidating sensation this elicited from Anlyn; she turned to gaze out at the Keep beyond the glass rather than strain her neck looking upwards.

"The cutbacks aren't too severe," Bishar said. "Besides, we've seen an incredible reduction in breakthrough attempts over the past few sleep cycles. We've been able to rest up two entire regiments as we prep some of the pilots for transfer to the war effort. It's a small sacrifice for the defense of the empire."

"There's been a drop-off in breach attempts?"

"Quite. Practically to nothing, in fact. Perhaps that's why you find me in such a pleasant mood, Cousin. Besides, it'll be a Wadi Winter before you convince me that anything will come of your little plan."

Bishar laughed in the panting, breathy Drenard way. "Ambassador to the Bern!" he said. "That's as good as they get!"

Anlyn frowned and waited for him to settle down. "I'm afraid it isn't your call, Cousin. It's entirely within my rights as a Councilman of the Circle and member of the royal line to make diplomatic gestures to a hereto uncontacted race of sentient beings—"

"Spare me," Bishar said, waving his hand. "*Uncontacted* is a stretch, and you know it. Besides, nobody knows the Scrolls better than I. Ever since the Rift was discovered and the Keep created, the old hierarchy has ceased to apply here. Anything that comes out of the Rift will continue to be hunted down and exterminated. Period. You can sign treaties with the ensuing debris, if you like." Bishar smiled. "Now, I've set aside suitable living quarters where you and your volunteers can get a good look at the entire process. You're welcome to stay for however long your lunacy persists."

Anlyn bristled. "As second in—"

Bishar waved her off. "I heard about our uncles, and I know where you stand in the royal line. However, even if you and your furry friend manage to one day scrounge up a male heir—and let's say the hybrid boy assumed the title of king—even *then*, you'll not have jurisdiction here. The importance of this job grants me full immunity from our family's politics, from your superstitious followers, and thank Hori it walls me off from the Council's petty squabblings."

Anlyn turned her back once more, this time to hide the disgust on her face. Then she saw it herself, clearly reflected in the visisteel. She realized Bishar could see it as well. There certainly seemed to be no hiding of *anything* on the Keep.

"There now, Cousin, let's keep our temperate selves. If I'm being

too cold, I assure you it's with an inner warmth of mirth. These are exciting times for the Empire, a chance for lasting peace—"

An enormous explosion interrupted Bishar's optimism. It registered all around them, blossoming like a new sun in a thousand panes of visisteel—a prismatic glory of destruction reflected everywhere at once.

The command room filled with sounds: beeping machines, alarms, and cursing Drenards. Anlyn looked from one bright image to another, hunting for the original as all the workers reflexively slapped at the devices around their necks, triggering even more alarms.

"The ship," Edison roared in English.

Anlyn turned and found him pointing, a quivering claw extending out toward one transparent wall. His gesture directed her to the sight of the original image, to the burning fury beyond the Keep responsible for all the false reflections.

Anlyn felt her body grow cold. She placed her hands on the visisteel, staring. Disbelieving. The ambassadorial ship had been replaced with a cloud of expanding fire and chunks of glowing steel.

Its crew. Her supplies. Everything.

They were all gone.

3

Two weeks after their struggle with Byrne, Molly and Walter search planet Lok for a member of the Drenard Underground.

Meanwhile, the rift they thought they'd prevented from opening releases ship after Bern ship.

The craft gather as a fleet in orbit.

Molly weaved her way through the dusty, crowded market full of anxious shoppers, the bark of hagglers, and the desperate leer of eager booth attendants. The place looked identical to the last five markets she'd visited in the last five dry husks that called themselves villages. And everywhere they went, the desiccated Lokian air attacked her in the same manner: it wicked the moisture from her mouth, substituting it for cotton. Even her Wadi, who rode along on Molly's shoulder, seemed weary of her arid, childhood planet. The lizard-like creature's normally active tongue remained in its mouth as its head bobbed lazily with Molly's gait.

She scanned the crowd for Walter, which had become another familiar pattern. He was supposed to be helping her find an old friend of her mother's, but Molly seemed to spend as much time looking for the troublesome Palan as she did hunting down the lady who could get them to hyperspace and back.

A young Callite snuck up and tugged on Molly's sleeve, interrupting her thoughts. She turned and politely declined whatever he was selling. As she waved the boy off, however, something in a nearby glass case caught her eye—the shape of the thing popping out in her peripheral as intimately familiar.

"Relays and converters," the boy said more insistently. He held up a basket of electrical parts in front of Molly and rattled them for effect.

"I have what I need," Molly said. She patted the canvas sack dangling by her hip.

The boy ignored her and launched into his practiced spiel, detailing every sick member of his family and every atrocity committed by the Lokian government. Molly hardly heard him as she brushed past and moved toward the booth of used electronics. She knelt down by the display case and peered inside at the reader propped up on its stand. It was the same make as the one she'd lost on Palan, but just a few years older. There'd been a dozen instances over the past two weeks when she'd wanted one—not so much for reading a book as to have something to write in that her mother couldn't access. She checked its condition while her Wadi pawed at its own

reflection in the glass.

The reader appeared a tad beat up, but no more than a new one would after a few weeks of use. Molly studied the pads of her fingers: swollen and purple, they bore dozens of scabbed-over prick marks and throbbed with a dull, persistent ache. She hated the idea of bartering for any more supplies, but she really wanted that reader.

"Excuse me, how much for that one?" She looked up at the shopkeeper and pointed through the smeared glass.

The Callite booth attendant bent down behind the counter to see which one she was pointing to. He rubbed his brown, scaly jaw, and a forked tongue flicked out over his lips. "Three hundred," he said in a gruff voice not yet accented by his time on Lok. "And, of course, a vote for the Freedom Party."

Molly groaned and clenched her fists protectively. Beside her, the Wadi pulled its head back and shot out a forked tongue of its own. It wasn't that Molly had anything against the Freedom Party—she didn't care one way or the other about Lokian politics—she was just sick and tired of being polled in general.

"How much if I don't vote?" she asked.

Through the glass, she could see the shopkeeper's eyes narrow, his pupils squeezing into vertical slits. He stood and peered over the counter at her. "It's the *elections*," he said. "Everyone votes."

Molly held up her hands, palms out, to show him her fingers. "I've already voted *dozens* of times. I'll give you three-fifty for it."

"The Freedom Party really needs your vote," the shopkeeper whispered. His English was impeccable, obviously learned in an off-planet school and at a young age, nothing at all like the drawling slang common to Lokians and local Callites. He narrowed his eyes at her silence, the sideways lids coming together like elevator doors. "Don't you care about what's going on up there?" He pointed up to the tattered fabric roof of his stall. "The Navy is putting together a new fleet, disguised as aliens. The Liberty Party is behind it all."

Molly shook her head but kept her mouth shut.

"What about my *people*?" the Callite asked, moving to a sales tactic Molly had heard too often. "Every day more and more are shipped out—"

"Only the illegals," Molly interrupted, unable to contain herself. She looked down at the reader behind the glass, wondering if it was worth getting in an argument over.

"But now those shuttles are being shot down. My people are being daily murdered, and you hesitate to vote."

"I've voted *plenty*," she said.

The Callite hissed. "For all I know, half those marks on you are for the Liberty Party. The least you can do is cancel one out. And I'll

make it two-fifty."

Molly blew out her cheeks. "Four hundred and no vote," she said. "I promise you, I've voted Freedom twice as much as Liberty."

A mother trailing three squealing kids approached, stopping for a moment to look in the shop's display case. Molly and the Callite stared at one another, waiting for the family to move on.

"Fine," he finally said, his pupils relaxing. "Do me a favor, though —" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Stick your finger in and pretend, just in case anyone's watching. I can't have you making this a trend."

Molly nodded and reached gingerly into her front pocket to fumble for some chips. Her fingers were too injured and numb to tease the denominations apart by feel, so she brought a few of them out to look through. The Callite made a coughing sound at the sight of the money. Molly tried to curl her fingers around the small pile to hide them. She plucked out two decas and slid them across the counter.

The Callite nodded to the voting machine beside the register. It had become a familiar, fear-inducing sight with its Galactic Voting Company seal stamped on the side. It was about the size of a portable toolbox, but with a single opening on the front and two buttons on the top marked 'F' and 'L.' Molly noted the letter 'F' was nearly worn off the button, while the 'L' was shiny and new. Voting machines on Lok tended to bear the mark of their owners, rather than the political stance of its users.

Missing, of course, was any list of candidates—or any way to know who or what one was actually voting for. When Molly told her mom they'd arrived in the middle of an election cycle, she thought Parsona was going to fry a circuit board. After their first few supply runs and stays in a handful of small towns, Molly and Walter had discovered why: election years weren't the safest of times to be running around, *needing* things. Most people stocked up well in advance.

The Callite swiped his arm over the two chips, and the money disappeared from the counter. He deposited them in the slit at the top of the register, where they fell a long way and landed with a hollow thunk. The keeper frowned, then reached to the top of the voting machine, pushing down the 'F' with a loud click.

"I appreciate this," Molly said. She stuck her index finger into the machine, looking up and down the stalls at the milling shoppers to see if anyone was watching—

Without warning, the padded clamps inside the device squeezed around the joints of her finger, locking her digit in place. Molly whirled on the keeper, and her Wadi hissed.

She put her other hand on the face of the machine and tried to

pull her finger out. The Callite placed both of his hands on top of the heavy device, holding it firmly in place. He leaned close.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just such an important election. Hold still, there's only a tiny—"

Prick.

Her index finger had already been hit once that day in order to secure a full tank of water for *Parsona*. The metal needle hit that fresh wound, and it felt like a bullet ripping through the pad. Molly gasped as the pain shot all the way up to her elbow like an electrical current. She slapped the top of the counter with her other hand and bit her lip to keep from yelling out. The Wadi shot down her back, sticking its head under the hem of her shirt, its tail swishing madly.

With a loud click, the 'F' at the top of the machine popped up, and the chemicals in her blood logged one more vote for the venerable Freedom Party.

The clamps loosened soon after, and Molly withdrew her finger. She pressed it into her shorts, which were already spotted on both sides with brown dollops of dried blood. The Callite bent down and smiled as he removed the reader from the case. He laid it on the counter, and then dropped an "I Voted" adhesive healing strip on top of it.

Molly grabbed the reader and shook the strip off onto the counter. The stupid things just made her hands *more* useless.

"Thanks for shoppi—"

"Flank off," Molly grumbled. She dropped the reader into her shopping bag of assorted fruits and hardware parts and shooed the Wadi to her shoulder. She stalked away from the booth, kicking up plumes of dust with her flightboots as she went.

All around her buzzed yet another dry, dusty village she couldn't wait to get out of. And as soon as she found Walter and finished her latest project on the ship, that's exactly what they'd be doing. For the past two weeks, they'd traipsed halfway across her birth planet looking for an old acquaintance of her mother's: a Callite that went by the name of Cat. The ephemeral alien possessed an uncanny blend of notoriety and elusiveness. Everyone knew her, had recently seen her, but wherever they gestured, Molly and Walter found only another trace of her passing—another nod and extended arm pointing them ever after the mysterious woman. But now Molly had a solid lead on Cat's whereabouts, even though she loathed where it was taking her.

High above the small village, another Bern ship tore through Lok's atmosphere, its passage marked with a loud rumble. Molly fought the urge to look up, to see which direction it was heading. Like the other ships, it no doubt came from her father's old place, leaving the rift she had failed to close. Whatever Byrne had done, it had been

enough. Or, if her mother's guess was right, it wasn't the *old* rift they were coming through at all, but rather the *new* one Byrne's body had made when it was zapped out of existence. Molly wasn't sure which scenario made her feel more guilty. Either she'd failed to stop him from opening the old rift, or her life had been saved by the same act that now threatened the rest of the galaxy. Either way, a door to a very bad place was currently open, and Byrne's fleets were pouring through. Her feeble, bumbling efforts to stop him had come too late and proved too little.

Molly walked faster as the ship roared up into orbit, her cheeks burning with the memory of her failure. She concentrated on looking straight ahead, ignoring the complaints from the other market-goers. Even though none of them could possibly know of her involvement, the presence of the ships filled her with a paranoid dread, as if the annoyed crowds might suddenly realize the fault was hers and descend on her in the form of an angry mob.

"The Liberty party has the best plan for dealing with those things," a lady walking behind her said. A male voice agreed, but a Callite walking the other direction didn't. Molly quickened her pace even more as an argument broke out, the din of political discourse competing with the roar of thrusters vaporizing air.

If there was one thing she had learned and learned well regarding Lokian elections, it was that the process spilled copious amounts of blood. For votes and otherwise. And frankly, she was growing sick of the sight of the stuff.

As she left the squabble in her wake, she felt ever more impatient to do the same for the entire village. Her entire *planet*, even. All she wanted was to get to hyperspace, to find Cole, to be in his arms, and to see her father. Hopefully, the next stop would be their last. The problem was, Cat the Callite's trail seemed to be taking them toward Bekkie, Lok's capital city.

The absolute *last* place she wanted to be with elections looming.

4

Cole worked the manual crank to open the landing gear hatches and heard the distant hiss of air leaking inside the ship. He grabbed his helmet from the ground and snapped it on, even though his suit could only retain an hour or so of air. Riggs left his helmet off as he worked the last bolt out of the panel behind the seats. He pulled the sheet of flimsy steel free.

"Drenards, it's *freezing* out there!" Riggs said. He turned to Cole and smiled at his closed visor. "The air's fine, man. Frigid, but breathable."

Cole lifted his visor and felt the draft of cool air on his face. It didn't match the bright, searing light he'd seen during their rapid descent. "I wanna go first," he told Riggs.

"Be my guest. I'd rather keep you in sight, anyway."

Cole bit his tongue and grabbed one of the survival kits before ducking under the back of the hanging nav seat. He squeezed past Riggs and pushed the kit into the maintenance tunnel, then crawled head-first after it.

Cole held his biostick aloft as he worked his way across a series of jutting pipes and bundled wires. Above him, a smooth track ran into the distance, a mechanic's car hanging from its rails just a few meters ahead. Inverted and useless, the track and car taunted Cole as he moved across a rough terrain of mechanical systems, trying not to cut his flightsuit open on any of the sharp hose clamps.

The air he crawled into became more frigid by the meter. Cole snapped his head forward, locking his visor down against the biting cold. He could see light coming in from an opening ahead, which reminded him of a little problem: the blinding light they'd encountered during the crash landing was still out there. Without the canopy filters, they'd be blinded in an instant.

"What's taking you?" Riggs asked from behind.

Cole leaned on one elbow, his chest resting uncomfortably on a pump housing. He flicked his visor up and yelled back through the cold air: "That blinding light is still out there. It's gonna be hard to see a thing."

"Follow the grease-monkey track," Riggs yelled up to him. "There's a tool locker past the belly panel. Might be some welding plates in there."

Cole nodded and continued forward, heading toward the bright shaft of light. It came down through the nose gear bay, just five meters or so behind the cockpit. The harsh rays filtered past the landing pads and the hydraulic gear. Soon, more spots danced in

Cole's vision. He thought his sight was getting worse until one of the spots flew through his open visor and hit him in the face.

It was *snow*. A flurry of dancing flakes streamed down through the open hatch.

Cole didn't dare look up as he passed beneath the shaft. He kept his head down and stowed the emergency kit off to the side before heading deeper into the belly of the Firehawk.

"Damn, it's snowing," he heard Riggs say. "Doesn't burn the tongue, either, so we're good on water."

Cole felt relieved to hear Riggs thinking like that. It gave him hope that they could work together to survive the mess they were in. He crawled over a piece of ductwork and felt the red band push into his ribs. It reminded him of the voices he'd heard during their crash landing. He wondered if they'd been real, or if he was just losing his mind. Maybe he had been hearing things amid all the alarms. Was he *really* in hyperspace? What did that even *mean*? Had he hallucinated the entire conversation?

He felt himself leaning toward the latter. They were probably on a planet, somewhere near the polar caps. Any time now, the Navy would trace their hyperspace signature and come to rescue them.

Well, rescue *Riggs*, anyway. They would want to *imprison* him.

He continued to crawl forward, not sure what to believe. Or even hope for.

"Should be right there," Riggs hollered.

Looking back, Cole could see Riggs just past the pool of light and the descending snow. He had retrieved and donned his helmet, and his open visor already held a dusting of the white flakes. Riggs pointed to one side of the tunnel; Cole followed the gesture and recognized a handle on the hatch beside him. He rolled over to one side and flicked the compartment open. The door was just as upside-down as everything else, so he had to hold it up against gravity while he set the biostick inside. Grunting—his ribs resting on something hard and sharp—he tried to find a more comfortable position while he peered inside.

Most of the tools were still strapped in place, but several of the boxes had come loose in the crash. The gear had been stowed with a ton of combat Gs in mind, which meant the crash had been rougher than it felt. Cole thought about how he'd barely gotten his grav suit connected in time and shivered with delayed fear.

The compartment contained a lot of useful stuff. He grabbed a utility blade and leaned back on his shoulder, still holding the heavy door up. He stuffed the knife into one of the pockets on the front of his flightsuit.

"Did you find them?" Riggs asked.

Cole grunted and forced himself back on his side. “Not yet,” he hollered. He saw a large wrench strapped to one wall of the compartment and worked it loose, then propped it under the heavy hatch, holding it up. Letting go of the lid, Cole worked his head into the bin and started rummaging around by the soft, blue light of the biostick.

“Got ’em,” he said, his voice echoing in the metal compartment. He came out with three welding plates held together with a rubber band. Each of them should snap into the inside of their visors, hopefully providing protection from the light outside. One of them was marred with scratches and small blisters where bits of glowing metal had landed on it. Someone must’ve been welding as they held the plate in their hand, pretty much ruining the thing. Cole rolled over and slid the curved piece of plasteel into his hip pocket and looked for anything else useful. Satisfied with what he had, he turned around in the tight crawlspace, banging his helmet on some pipes as he wiggled back toward the shaft of light.

“One for each?” Riggs asked, looking at the dark plates of plasteel in Cole’s hand.

“Yup. And a third that’s in pretty bad shape. Here.”

They had to pop their helmets off to snap the plates to the insides of their visors. Every movement brought grunts of exertion as they tried to position themselves on mechanical systems that should’ve been *above* them, easy to access from the sliding mechanic’s cart.

Cole got his helmet back on and snapped the visor down. It made everything pitch-black, so he lifted it back up. He hadn’t done much welding, not since making it into flight school, but he could remember how you had to move the wand into place by feel, not able to see anything until the plasma arced out to whatever you were working on.

“I’m going first this time,” Riggs said. He had his helmet back in place, his visor open.

Cole nodded. He left his own visor cracked just enough to see where he was putting his hands and knees; the angle of the plasteel blocked off the blinding light from above.

Riggs worked both survival kits between the mechanic’s rails and up into the landing gear housing, a square column of hydraulic pistons, wires, and cables. He slowly wormed his way out of sight, his feet ascending up into the falling flakes of snow. Cole pushed behind and prepared to make the climb out as well.

“It’s cold as Pluto up here,” Riggs said, his voice muffled by his helmet. “I can’t see anything.”

Cole made his way up the struts of the extended landing gear, his head level with Riggs’s knees. He looked away and raised his visor a little more so he wouldn’t have to yell.

“Can’t see because it’s too bright?” Cole asked.

Riggs crouched down in the landing gear well, his boots perched on the retracting struts by Cole’s hands. He cracked his visor. “No, the plates work great, there’s just snow in every direction. The drifts look like they’re up to the ship’s belly on one side. A few more hours and we’ll be buried.”

Cole looked at the two survival kits lodged by the hydraulic reservoir. With heavy rationing, they contained enough food and supplies for a week at the very most. He thought about what they should salvage out of the ship. “Can we build a lean-to on the sheltered side of the hull?”

“I don’t know, man. The snow is coming in sideways, and there’s lots of it. Probably gonna cover the entire ship. Looks like you really screwed us big-time.”

Cole couldn’t look up to read Riggs’s face because of the light streaming down around him, but he could hear some of the raw malice returning to his old friend’s voice.

“I swear we jumped to open space,” was all he said in defense.

Riggs snorted. “Obviously.”

Cole grabbed the extended struts and swung himself around to the other side of the gear. He flipped his visor shut and climbed up the opposite side of the hydraulic pistons Riggs clung to.

“I’m gonna have a look,” he shouted.

“Be my guest.”

The smooth hydraulic arms were slick with oil and snow, causing Cole’s boots to slide around as he searched for a good perch. The welding plate made the world so dark he could barely see, even with the bright light beginning to filter in. Above, the sides of the landing gear well were lined with the open hatches that normally protected the skids when they were stowed. The flat plates of steel pointed up into the sky, creating two high walls Cole couldn’t get to the top of. He reached instead for the rear portion of the well, wrapping his gloves around the thick plating that formed the underbelly of the Firehawk’s fuselage. Hoisting himself into the bright light, Cole found the darkness replaced with a featureless landscape of snow and ice. The flakes in the air were huge, thick, and moving sideways. Moreso than the light wind seemed to warrant.

If fact, there didn’t seem to be much wind at all, not enough to explain snow moving horizontal to the ground. Suddenly, the incongruent mix of sight and sense induced vertigo, and Cole felt as though he were peering out through a window in a cliff face. He cracked his visor a little to see if perhaps the helmet was blocking out the wind.

Nothing.

He snapped the visor back in place, banishing the sliver of bright light that had attempted to work its way inside. Looking beyond the belly of the Firehawk, Cole noted the visibility would probably have been pretty good without all the driving snow—the visor seemed to filter the light perfectly.

Which means, Cole realized suddenly, the ambient air in this place is as bright as a cutting torch!

He checked out the side of the hull catching the drifting snow. Like Riggs had said, the level had already ramped up even with the massive bulk of the upturned ship. He lowered himself back down below the lip of the open hatch and cracked his visor; Riggs knelt across from him, clutching the other side of the landing struts.

"Give me one of the kits," he told Riggs.

Riggs passed it up, and Cole worked the long strap over his helmet. He then pulled the utility knife out of his flightsuit and held it out to his former friend.

"What? I get to kill you know?" Through the crack in his visor, Cole could see a thin smile on Riggs's lips.

"Maybe, but not directly. I want you to follow these wires from the landing gear down into the maintenance tunnel and cut them back as long as you can."

"You gonna rappel down with them?"

"I want to see if the snow is packed enough to walk on. If not, we're gonna be trapped here while we get buried alive."

Riggs took the knife. "Joy," he said. He worked his way down the well, tracing the wires and cutting them free of their zip-ties as he went.

A minute later, Cole pulled the free end of the wires up to him. He had a good seven meters of the stuff, more than enough to get to the edge of the snow.

He checked the other end of the wire to make sure it was secured to the hatch, and then began climbing out.

Riggs grabbed one of his boots before he could get very far. Cole looked down at the black visor peering up at him.

"Be careful," he heard Riggs yell through his helmet, his voice muffled and distant. "Don't die before I can kill you." He shook the utility knife at him for effect.

Cole smiled behind his visor and pulled himself out, crawling all the way up on top of the metal belly of the Firehawk.

The surface had already iced up, making Cole's boots slip as he tried to rise to his feet. Coupled with the vertigo of the sideways flurry, the slickness made him feel unstable and a tad nauseous. His brain wanted to lean *into* the snow, but there was no wind to hold him. His stomach flipped; he sank back to his hands and knees and

decided to stay there, the survival pack dangling off one side of his back.

Cole kept one end of the wire wound tight around his glove and played the rest out behind him. It was a half-dozen meters to the edge of the white, fluffy snowbank that led up to the ship's belly. The thick flurries in the air made everything fuzzy, but it seemed as if the bank was visibly growing and creeping forward, the large flakes piling up fast.

Riggs was right: they didn't have very much time. If they didn't figure out something quick, they were going to freeze to death in a large Navy-built coffin.

Cole crawled toward the snowbank, reaching it just as the mostly flat belly of the ship started curving down to the side. He pressed one gloved hand into the whiteness and felt the solidity of wet pack, not the dry stuff he feared he'd find. He crawled into it another meter until his knees crunched in the stuff, and then his boots. He worried about the dizziness, his head still reeling from vertigo, but at least the snow gave him more traction than the ice. Enough to think about standing up.

Before he could, he saw something strange in the snow. One of his gloves was inside a boot print. Cole lifted his hand and looked down at the impression, feeling even more turned around. He looked over his shoulder, back at the bare metal of the Firehawk's belly, and saw his tracks through the snow—the parallel furrows created by his knees as straight as the wire trailing through them.

How did I make that impression? Cole thought.

When he looked forward again, the mystery resolved itself: out of a thick flurry of snow, he saw a boot a few meters away. Looking up, he saw there was a furry leg inside that boot—and a twin next to it. Together, they supported a humanoid wrapped in scraps of fur to the top of its head. Black goggles poked out of the mottled strips; the figure seemed to be staring down at him.

Cole reached one arm to the man. "*Mortimor?*" he shouted inside his helmet. He couldn't believe it. He felt giddy with the thought of not just finding living beings out there, but possibly the very person he thought he'd heard during the crash, the last person he thought he'd ever meet in person.

The figure nodded his head as if he'd heard Cole.

But the gesture must've been a signal to whoever had crept behind him, because that's where the blow to his neck came from.

Cole collapsed, his helmet striking the metal hull through a few inches of snow. The impact popped his visor open, letting in the searing light and the biting cold. Cole squeezed his eyes shut and tried to bring his hands up to close his helmet, but someone knelt on his

back, bending his arms high in a direction they didn't normally go. Cole felt the emergency kit being ripped off him.

Whoever it was barked out orders to someone else. He spoke English, but with a strange accent: "Check for more crew. Grab everything you can, fusion fuel first."

"Why we still raiding?" someone else yelled. "Ain't we getting outta here soon?"

"And leave this lovely weather? Hell, no. Now get moving. You'll be buried in an hour."

Several pairs of boots stomped away; Cole could feel the vibrations coming up through the fuselage and into his helmet. He yelled out to warn Riggs, but the person on his back twisted his arm up until his shouts turned into gasps. As Cole fell silent, fighting to breathe past the pain, he heard more sounds: the crunch of snow as someone approached from the other direction, stomping up the drift. Cole tried to peer ahead, to see who it was, but his visor was open too wide to hazard even a glance.

"Take this one to the sled. I'll help Saul."

The person on Cole's back released him. Before he could move to close his visor, a new set of powerful hands—more than one pair—seized his arms. Cole was dragged forward; he dug his toes into the snow in protest. He tried to snap his visor shut by whipping his neck, but it had already frozen in place.

The men on either side had no problem handling his weight as they crunched down the bank of snow. They marched for what seemed a hundred meters or so. Cole heard more voices ahead; he kept his head down and his eyes tight, conserving his energy.

When they stopped walking, one of his escorts let go of his left arm. Cole didn't hesitate; he spun in that direction, back around the guy holding his right arm and lashed out with one knee. It connected with something soft, causing his other arm to come free. He reached up and slammed his visor shut so he could see what he was fighting.

The blow to his stomach came just as he was blinking the world into focus. He doubled over. Something slammed into his right knee, buckling him. Cole fell to the snow as several people crashed down on his back, beating him unconscious.

5

Anlyn screamed. She ran out of the command center and down the hallway, the glass tube providing an anguishing and perfect view of the fiery destruction beyond.

The corridor beneath her feet trembled as Edison raced to her side, reaching for her as she collapsed to her knees.

“Nooo,” she whimpered. She covered her face with her hands so she wouldn’t have to see, but the flashing lights and warning alarms from the command room echoed off the glass around her, sliding through the cracks in her fingers and hammering home the reality of the loss—of the so many lives destroyed.

“It came from the Rift,” someone in the command center yelled.

Anlyn could hear Bishar screaming orders, demanding updates, and scrambling a regiment. She felt like the great paradox of burning ice—the frozen heart of the depressed wrapped in a flame of vengeance.

That didn’t come from the rift, she told herself. She knew. Bodi, her ex-fiancée, was responsible. It was an act of sabotage, designed to spare only her. It stunk of him. Immediate. Remorseless. Savage. The cowardice of asking lackeys to sacrifice *their* lives.

Anlyn looked at her palms. Below—past the grav panels and through the transparent visisteel—she could see ships darting out from their stations. She watched them as they roared toward the expanding cloud of debris.

Edison wrapped his arms around her as she fought valiantly to not break down. She felt like a Wadi canyon with its base eroded by the wind. Her shoulders shivered as if they threatened to topple off her body. Outside, all her hopes were scattering in a billion pieces. So many noble, valiant believers had been reduced to dust. Thinking of them—of the many faces, smiling and bowing in the corridors—it made the ridiculousness of her mission hit home. It made her feel lonely and young. A little princess, spoiled and spouting prophecy, journeying to the Great Rift because of some old words handed down through time.

The shame she felt—the guilt—they shattered floodgates already weakened by despondency. Anlyn sobbed into Edison’s fur. She heard his lance drop, felt him scoop her up into his lap.

Over his arm and through the tears, she watched a pointless fleet of emergency response ships circle the new nebula, looking for clues. The only good they did was to whip what remained into whorls and eddies of nothingness.

"We caught something on vid," Bishar said softly.

Anlyn tore her eyes away from the debris field. She had no idea how long she'd been staring, transfixed, into the blossoming cloud. She wiped her face and looked up at Bishar, then pushed herself from Edison's lap. She took a few steps away from them both, trying to look less like the child she suddenly felt.

"It looks like a solid beam of light," Bishar said. "It's only there for a single frame, right before the explosion. We've never seen anything like it from the Rift. It's—there's nothing we could've—"

"It wasn't your fault," Anlyn told her cousin. "And it wasn't the Rift's. I know who did this, and I know why."

"Cousin, I know you're upset. We all are. Several among your volunteers had family here at the Keep. There will be a great cooling for all—"

Anlyn turned to face Bishar, her face as stern and serious as she could muster. "There will be a great *burning*, Bishar Nooo, *that's* what there'll be. And I do *not* doubt the Rift's involvement out of some superstitious fancy—I *know* the work of my former suitor. Check your vid again, and tell me which direction that beam of light was going."

"But Cousin, I already told you it was on a single frame. How do you suppose we determine the direction if we can't see it moving?"

"I don't expect we will. You have *your* bias and I have *mine*. They just point in opposite directions."

Bishar rose to his feet and looked through the visisteel. "If what you say is correct, I'll file the charges myself. There'll be an investigation. The Circle will look into this—I'll demand it."

"The Circle is aflame," Anlyn said, "and Bodi's the torch. My mission here was our only chance at snuffing it." She looked down the passage-way toward the control center. "I'll not be surprised if the flash of light you saw was a message to the Bern, or that the reduced break attempts are no coincidence ahead of my coming—"

"Preposterous! I'll hear your theories of jilted lovers and such barbarisms as *this*," Bishar waved a hand at the scene beyond the glass, "but not of treason against the Empire. Not from the Circle, nor from *any* Drenard for that matter."

"I wouldn't put it past him," she muttered.

Edison picked up his lance from the floor and rose, taking his place by Anlyn's side.

"I detest supposition," he said, looking out at the ships encircling the cloud. "All theories are testable, or they are not truly theories."

"I don't follow," Bishar said. "Is he speaking English?"

Anlyn turned to Edison. "I think he's saying we should go and see

for ourselves. Is that right?"

Edison nodded.

Anlyn rested her head against his side and reveled in his warmth. She looked out at the swirling loss, at the stars of her galaxy beyond. Reflected in the glass, she could see the confusion on Bishar's face.

"He means," she told her cousin, "we need to enter the rift to know."

Bishar gaped at Anlyn. "I hated the idea of you hanging out here with a full complement of peacekeepers while you waited on some insane prophecy to come true. What makes you think I'll go along with this plan?"

Anlyn looked over at him; she noted the way his hands clenched the sash across his tunics.

"Because," she said, "I asked the former as is my right and duty as a member of the Circle, a right you were prepared to deny. I ask you now as my cousin—"

"A cousin I hardly know!" Bishar shook his head. "I'm sorry, but what you need now is some rest while my men investigate. You can burn away your woe in peace and think with a cooler head come morrow."

"Come morrow, I will be on the other side of that rift or I'll be dead by *your* hands," Anlyn said. "For *that's* what you'll have to do to stop me."

Bishar laughed, but eyed Edison warily. "Nonsense, Cousin. To *stop* you, I'll just have to stop you. Come, my men are on the alert, and my best experts will go over the evidence. We'll travel to Keep Central and get you more cloaks and a warm meal. While you rest, I'll prepare my report for the Circle and request transport for your safe return to Drenard. It does no respect to the dead for you to add to their number."

Anlyn reached over and took hold of Edison's lance; he relinquished it willingly. Bishar made a sudden move forward, but Anlyn backed away, and Edison shoved her cousin so hard he nearly fell.

"Not a move!" she told him as he staggered backward.

In the command center, several heads watched the scene intently, hands reaching for warning devices—and worse.

"In case legend of this lance has not yet arrived to this corner of the galaxy," Anlyn yelled beyond Bishar, "I will tell you that what you saw beyond this glass is easily reproducible *right here!* I'll take an entire corner of the Keep with me, by the twins of Hori."

"Anlyn." Bishar held out his hands, pleading. "I understand your rage, but you must cool yourself."

"I *am* cool, Cousin. Cool as ice. And I take it from the quiver in

your voice that you know of this lance."

It was a bluff, the lance a mere pyrotechnic toy, but in Anlyn's experience, rumors rarely dwindled in their retelling.

"I've heard stories," he said, a false smile creeping across his face.

"You've heard whispers from shadows carried on a Drenard wind compared to what this device is capable of. What *I* am capable of. Here's what you'll do. Before you write your security report, you'll craft a letter to every family from that ship expressing my—expressing *our* deepest grief. Then you'll swear by Hori it was sabotage and open an investigation. But first, call your best pilot and have him bring the swiftest Bern ship you have in impound and lock it to the end of this corridor. Make sure there's plenty of fuel and supplies. *One* pilot. He'll be free to go."

"And what will you do with this ship?" Bishar asked. He kept an eye on Edison, who had backed to Anlyn's side. "Do you think I'll unblock the rift for you?"

"Yes, I think you will. Feel free to tell the Circle we were on my ship when it blew, if such will protect your job. And if you think your soul is better served by blasting us out of the cosmos and living with your family's blood on your hands—that is your decision to make. The other option is to allow us to depart and face our deaths in our own manner. Choose this, and no harm will come to your people."

Bishar continued to show Anlyn his palms. He glanced at the lance.

"Very well," he said. "My men will escort you to your end. We had an interior barrier patch upcoming, anyway. I'll move it up the schedule. I'll even use the attack on your ship as an excuse for having done so. But know this: any sign of a breach, and your ship will not prevent us from firing. Also, I will *not* chance discriminating between Bern craft if things get ugly."

Bishar looked at her sternly. "One more thing," he said. "Your mission will not pass back through here, no matter what happens. You'll not be allowed through. *Ever*. Understand that I am doing this not for you, but to get you out of my tunics so I may perform my duties. You leave this galaxy never to return, because even if you did, you would not find your Empire welcoming you home as they did the last time. I'll make sure of *that*, Cousin."

6

The starship *Parsona* roared a dozen meters above the prairies of Lok, low enough to scatter wild game and part the tall grasses. It was nearly dawn, and the stars over the eastern horizon had disappeared as the black gradually melted into blue. With her lights off and altitude low—clinging to the cover of a slipping night—the old ship flew with a mind of not being seen. More importantly, she flew *herself* for just the second time.

"Feel any better?" Molly asked. She looked up from her reader to the instruments arrayed across the dash.

"It's not quite as sluggish as before," Parsona said through the radio speakers. "Firing the thrusters myself feels better than updating waypoints and letting the autopilot do the rest. Of course, I wouldn't trust me in a dogfight or in a tight canyon."

Molly laughed. "Neither would I. You know, we have a few relays left—I'm pretty sure I could interface you with the hyperdrive. It's the same basic hook-up we did with the laser cannons, and the nav computer has a ton of electrical triggers left—"

"I'm not sure about that," Parsona said.

"Why? It's no different than firing the lasers or operating the thruster solenoids."

"I know," Parsona said. "It's not that. It's just that—I'm not sure I *want* to be in control of the hyperdrive. I don't know that I'd trust myself."

Molly nodded. "Okay. I understand."

And she did. Ever since she found out her father and boyfriend were probably stuck in hyperspace, the temptation to just jump to the center of Lok had become unbearable. She felt a shiver of panic every time she considered it, followed by a pang of cowardice each time she did nothing.

"Another contact on SADAR," her mom said, interrupting her thoughts.

"I see it," Molly said. "Looks like one of the big models." She watched the blip intently, having become something of an expert on recognizing the signatures of the Bern ships. The flashing indicator moved away from the rift situated over her home village and slowly worked its way toward a low-altitude orbit. Leaning forward, Molly peered up through the carboglass at the glimmer of orbiting hulls overhead. The fleet moved smoothly, like an animated constellation against the backdrop of fading stars. One of the vessels, a potato-shaped monster the size of a decent moonlet, was usually visible even during the daytime. All the ships did was shuffle around in various

formations, almost as if drilling for upcoming maneuvers.

"What are they waiting on?" she asked her mom. "Why don't they attack us or just move on to someplace else?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're just being methodical. Or perhaps they're waiting on something. I know as little of the Bern as you do."

Molly looked down at her lap; her Wadi was stretched out along her thigh, its gleaming scales catching the first rays of dawn. She stroked the animal's back, right between the two nubs rising from its shoulder blades, and fretted over her mounting concerns.

"Between the Bern up there and news of the Drenard invasion, even if we *do* get to hyperspace, will there be any reason to come *back?* I mean, will there be anything left to come back *to*?"

"We need to plan as if there will be," her mother said.

"And you're sure this Cat person can help?"

"She knows the people who can. She'll remember me."

"You, the *ship*? Or the *old* you?"

Molly still had a difficult time separating the experiences of her mothers—the personality copied to the ship's computer and the husk of a woman she'd met, virtually, on Dakura. Somehow, the former had become more real to her than the latter. And that was true even before she found out Walter and Cole had pulled the plug on her mom's physical body.

"She knows of the *old* me, not as I am now."

"And she was part of the group you and dad were sent to investigate? The source of the illegal fusion fuel?"

"She did some work for them, yes. It took your father and myself a long time and a spot of luck to get an introduction. Unless we go through her, it'll take just as long if not longer to make contact again. Especially with everything else that's going on."

"You mean the Bern?"

"Partly. More the elections, though. Callites are tolerated seven out of eight years. Ignored, really. But come polling time, their numbers—the amount of votes they can wrangle together—it creates tension. Contacting and dealing with the Underground would be easier any other time."

Molly sighed and looked back to her lap. Her new reader rested on her other thigh, opposite the Wadi. The creature pawed at the device playfully, almost as if it knew Molly was about to redirect her attention away from scratching its back and return to the letter she was writing Cole. She patted the animal's head and looked over the first line of the note, wondering why she was bothering with writing it. It wasn't like she could send it to him, or even be sure he was still alive. Her thoughts drifted to her father—and the same nagging doubts arose for him as well.

As her chest grew heavy, the Wadi gave up its jealous jousting and crawled from her thigh to her shoulder; it wrapped its tail around Molly's neck and flicked its tongue against her cheek. It did stuff like that, and always in response to the same few moods, almost as if it could sense how she felt. Molly was cautious, however, about reading too much into its idiosyncrasies. She tilted her head to nuzzle the animal and wished, not for the first time, they could somehow communicate with each other, mostly to find out what was wrong with the alien creature. No matter how much she fed it, or how much water it drank, the poor thing kept getting smaller and smaller.

It had taken a few days to be sure, but by now there wasn't any doubt. Except for some plumpness around its belly, the colorful lizard had gone from iguana-sized to something half that, like a big gecko. The troubling part was not being able to ask anyone about the species or research it any way. There was little enough out there on the Drenard planet and even less on its fauna. All Molly knew was that the strange animal had taken to eating and drinking more than a Glemot —but despite all that intake, it continued to waste away…

••••

Walter's door slid open, recessing into the jamb with a quiet hiss. The young Palan exited his room and peeked across the cargo bay. Up in the cockpit, he could see one of Molly's elbows sticking out over the flight controls. The ship was dark and silent, the barest glow of dawn lighting up the sky beyond the canopy. Walter tip-toed across the hallway and unlocked Molly's cabin door with her Captain's codes. He kept an eye forward as he waited for her room to slide open.

Slipping inside, Walter forced down the panicked feeling that gets Junior Pirates in trouble—the "heist shakes" that'll get someone busted faster than the floods. *You have to think clearly*, he always reminded himself. *Stay focused on the loot. Remember what you're after.*

It helped that he'd done this several times in the past weeks.

He went to her dresser, dropped down to one knee, and opened the narrow drawer at the bottom. Two stacks of clothes: the white tanks she wears under her flightsuit on one side and the plain cotton underwear on the other.

Walter reached under the latter, feeling for his treasure. *His*.

He wrapped his fingers around the small piece of fabric and pulled it out. Rubbing it with one thumb, he realized how unnecessary this charade was. She should just *give* it to him. *Willingly*.

Bending close to the carpet, he looked for the single hair he knew would be there and found it. He slid the drawer closed, holding the

hair in place until it caught in the dresser. Walter shook his head at the ancient trick, resolving to love her even though she did stupid stuff like this.

He keyed open her door and bent down low, his palms on the ship's decking. Slowly, he peeked around the corner of the doorway, keeping his head in a spot people rarely looked. Molly's elbow was still visible sticking out over the controls. Walter pushed up from the deck and darted across the hall, back to his own room. As he ran, he clutched his new favorite thing to his chest, eager to get alone with it.

He left the lights out in his room and went straight to the bed, jumping under the covers. Feeling with his fingers, he found the seam in the piece of cloth and made sure it was in the back. With a shiver of anticipation, he lowered the red band down over his forehead.

"Hello?" he thought.

Silence. He waited, growing impatient. Several minutes seemed to go by, but it could've been a fraction of that—

"Ah! Walter, it'ss been a while."

"Yeah," he thought, *"I haven't had the time. Been bussy."* It was a lie. Truth was, Molly hadn't been off the ship long enough to do any proper snooping in almost three days.

"Well, I can't wait to hear about what you've been up to."

"Ssure, but not now. I, uh, can't talk long thiss time."

"I undersstand. Hey, I meant to assk you about ssomething lasst time, but you had to run before I could bring it up. You know thosse two armss you have? The oness in the bottom of the tool chesst?"

Walter cringed at the incessant hissing from the stranger's choice of words, the red band relaying everything in his own voice.

"Arms?" he thought aloud. "I—how did you know about thosse?"

"You were thinking about them the firsst time we sspoke. Don't you remember? I heard it quite clearly."

"Oh." Walter forgot it worked that way. But why would he have been thinking about those stupid things?

"Ssurely you know the armss I'm talking about. Unlesss you jusst have armss sstrewn all over the sship—"

"What? No. No. They're the only oness. But I wanted to talk about __"

"Right, right. The gold. Well here'ss the deal, Walter, I really would love to help you claim it, but firsst I'm going to need a favor from you."

"Okay, but it better not get me in trouble."

"Of coursse, of coursse. All I need you to do iss get me thosse armss. Do you think you could do that?"

"What? Why?"

"Doess it matter? I could jusst asss eassily assk you what you

want with thoussandss of barrelss of gold."

"I don't know." Walter rubbed his head, thinking. His coppery hair felt soft under his hand; it was getting too long and needed another pass with the shaver. He tried to picture himself with it grown out and what Molly would think about it. *"How do I get them to you?"* he asked. *"Where are you?"*

"I'm on my way to a little planet called Lok. Do you know it?"

Walter nodded. *"Yeah."*

"Exscellent. Wait, you're not there now, are you?"

"Am I thinking that?" Walter asked.

"Why don't you tell me where you are?" the voice asked. "I'll come right to you. Quick as I can."

Walter shook his head. He knew how these transactions went down. It was always best to *get* information, never a good idea to give it.

"I'll bring them to you," Walter thought. "Jusst pick a sspot."

"And you can deliver them? You have a sship?"

"Yess," Walter hissed.

It was another lie, but he kept those thoughts deep. *Palan* deep. The truth was: it didn't matter that he had no ship of his own, nor did it matter he couldn't even fly one. What he *could* do was reprogram hyperdrives to go wherever he wanted, just like how he'd sent Cole into a star and what he'd done back on Palan. With that kind of talent, *every* ship was practically his, and he may as well be the one flying them.

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Molly checked the instruments on the dash one more time, making sure her mom was on course and holding steady, before she leaned over her reader. Typing on the thing was quite painful with the current state of her fingers, all of which were scabbed and blistered with dozens of votes. And yet, the writing was psychologically soothing, somehow, even though she couldn't properly phrase an ounce of what she was feeling. It didn't seem to matter; just attempting to do so—to reach out to Cole in some tangible way—eased the pressing weight off her chest, allowing her to breathe a little.

She stared at the first two sentences of the journal tab while the Wadi crawled down her flightsuit and stretched back out along her thigh.

••••

6/10/2414

Dearest Cole,

I got a new reader on Lok. So, here I am, writing you a letter on it.

Horrid. She deleted the entry. Then she wrote the exact same thing. She deleted it once more. She repeated the same stilted, juvenile wording over and over. Molly finally shook her head and decided to start from scratch, forgetting the need to make it perfect. She would simply write her thoughts as they came to her, unscripted and unedited.

Cole. I don't know where to start. Trust me, I've tried. It's just… I've always been bad at this, being faithful to a journal. I never know what to write. I think my last one had two entries in it. The first entry was about how many entries I was planning on writing. I remember composing that one on my first day of school at Avalon. My second entry was an apology to myself for going so many months between entries. I remember writing it on the Orbital Station while I was waiting on you. I'd love to read what I wrote back then. Can you imagine if I knew all the things that would take place as soon as we left Earth? I wonder if I would've gone. Anyway, that reader is long gone, probably being used by a pirate somewhere on Palan.

Speaking of Palan, Walter kinda saved my butt again. Some crazy stuff went down when we got to Lok. That guy from Dakura, the one who tied me up in his ship, he was here. I thought he was you when I landed. Walter and I zapped him to hyperspace, but we may've accidentally opened a very bad door in the process. I'll tell you more about it once we're back together…

Gods… who am I kidding? Who am I even writing this to? I think I'm getting too used to talking to machines. It doesn't help that the only crewmate I have left is the color of metal and that my mom is a computer.

Speaking of mom, she told me where you probably are —that you'd be in hyperspace somewhere. She also told me how awful it was there. And that my father is probably there, too. I hope you landed someplace safe. I hope you two already found each other and are just hanging out and swapping stories and waiting on us to come pick you up.

Just… watch each other's backs, ok? I'm trying to get there, I promise. I'm coming to rescue you both. Just stay alive until i get there, okay? Cause I'm a little messed up

without you…

Drenards… now I'm blubbering. I shoulda waited till Bekkie and bought a waterproof reader. This stinks.

You know what else stinks? Not telling you I loved you the second I felt it. It was years ago. I bet you don't remember. It was after Hobbs showed us how we could stream vids to our school computers. You and I stayed up all night watching episodes of Water Marines and we had to hide under my bunk after lights-out with the sheets hanging over the edge.

Actually, you probably do remember, just… maybe not the same way I do. It was when our foreheads touched, leaning over the little screen, and you were laughing and I could smell your breath. I remember thinking how much I loved your laugh, and how normal everything felt. It was like being on a date. Like regular kids. I even liked the way your breath smelled, which has to mean something, right?

I've loved you since then, I'm pretty sure. Or maybe I'm just projecting back. That's been, like two years? And I've told you what… three times? I feel like an idiot. And not just for typing you a letter you'll never read. I should've let you call me "babe" or "sweetheart" or whatever you wanted to. If you were here you could call me anything…

Molly looked up as *Parsona* swerved to port a little. She checked the cargo cam to see if Walter was milling about, but the screen was empty, the boy still asleep. She bent back to the reader, annoyed at how stiff the buttons were on the keyboard and how her fingers throbbed after using them.

Anyway, you aren't here, and I seem to have to lose crap before I appreciate it. My parents, my reader, you, Glemot, Lucin… everything I really love gets snatched away. Or that's what I used to think. Now I think the things that get snatched away are the only things I can truly love. Jeez… I hope that isn't true. I hope *neither's* true.

Well, i guess that's my first entry. I think it sucks vacuum and I'll probably delete the whole thing later and this keyboard is the worst. Anyway, we're on the last leg to Bekkie, looking for an old friend of mom's so we can get some kinda special fuel for the hyperdrive. So, I gotta go. And now I can't stop typing, like I'm hanging up on you or something. This is definitely getting deleted.

I love you I love you I love you. Now be alive when I get there, 'cause I'm gonna kill you if you aren't.

You know what i mean.

-Molly

She looked over the entry and felt like a fool, every sentence clumsier than the one before. Holding down the function key with one finger—the pressure causing her pulse to throb up into her wrist—she hovered another finger over the "del all" button.

She stopped and wiped at her eyes. She powered the thing off, instead.

"Whatcha doing?" Walter asked.

Molly jumped, and the Wadi shot up to her shoulder, wrapping its tail around her neck and licking the air.

"Good gracious, Walter, don't sneak up on me like that."

"That wass my *loud* walk," Walter said. "What're you working on?"

"Oh, just writing some notes to myself."

"Like a diary?" Walter peered over at her reader.

"No. And don't you think of hacking into it. You've got enough gadgets to play with that you can leave mine alone."

Molly knew it was pointless as soon as she said it. Keeping the little pirate out of anything electrical was like tugging against the pull of a black hole. He was gonna get in, and she probably just made it more tempting to tell him not to.

"How far are we from the next csity?" Walter asked. He crawled over the flight console and into the navigator's seat. *Cole's* seat.

"Not far. Another half-hour. See where it says ETA on the nav computer?"

Walter leaned forward and glanced at the dash. He nodded, and Molly told herself he probably didn't need the lesson. The kid had recently done stuff with the ship's missile systems that she didn't think possible. He was worthless with a physical tool but a wiz with the digital sort. Then again, that may have just been due to laziness—

"There it iss!" he hissed, practically standing up in the nav seat.

Molly peered through the carboglass and saw it as well. Beyond the prairies and past a long stretch of dry dirt lay Bekkie. The town was nothing more than a wide and growing sprawl of hastily-built wooden structures, yet it was as cosmopolitan a city as Lok could boast. Which wasn't saying much.

"Careful where you put your hands," Molly told Walter, urging him back in his seat.

"It'ss ugly," he groaned. "Jusst like all the lasst placses."

His disapproval was quite a blow to Molly's birth planet, seeing that his home planet of Palan was the sort of place you wouldn't strand an enemy.

"It's just *different*, that's all," said Molly, not able to summon up

anything more positive. “Hopefully this’ll be our last stop.”

“The friend I sspoke to on the radio iss here?”

“Yeah,” Molly lied. The truth was: Walter had spoken with her mother, but Molly had kept her presence in the nav computer a secret for so long, revealing her now would be hard to explain—and harder the longer the ruse lasted. She felt like a kid probably does who keeps something from their parents until they can’t figure out why they started lying in the first place. And then they find themselves trapped into lying even more.

“What’ss her name again?”

“Are you kidding me? We’ve been looking for her for two weeks and you still can’t remember her name? It’s Catherine. With a cee.”

“That’ss right. A hard csee.” Walter turned and smiled at Molly. “I like that name.”

“Yeah, well try and remember it. This is already taking longer than I’d hoped. Now, the mechanic I met in the hardware store said we’ll probably find her in one of the pubs, so I want us to stick together, okay? The election stuff will probably be worse here than it was in the smaller towns, so we really need to be careful.”

“Okay.”

“Another thing: *No* looting.”

“Fine.”

“I really mean it, Walter.”

“I ssaid fine!”

Molly narrowed her eyes at him to hammer it home, then leaned forward to disengage the autopilot relays, taking over from her mom. She pulled back on the flightstick to gain a bit of altitude. There was enough traffic in the air around town to feel safe from the fleet above, almost like a solitary bird feeling emboldened by joining a large flock.

With a better view of the layout of town, she started picking out which of the many stables to land in. There were several to choose from on the near side of town, all of them a few kilometers from the city center to minimize thruster noise. Most looked extremely busy, whether due to the Bern fleet or the upcoming election, she couldn’t know. She picked one in the middle of style, with not too many fancy ships, but no derelicts propped up on wooden stilts, either. Something she could afford, but where *Parsona* wouldn’t get robbed.

“There’ss a better one over there,” Walter said as she peeled away for the stable she’d chosen. He pointed to one closer to town where fancy hulls gleamed in the growing light of dawn.

“A little out of our league, pal.”

Molly thumbed the landing gear down and grabbed the radio. The town ahead stirred with plenty of activity despite the early hour. Headlights moved through the city streets, each pair kicking up a

plume of dust that streaked off and thinned in the breeze.

Molly squeezed the mic. “GN-290 *Parsona* to…” she read the stable’s info from the nav screen, “… Pete’s Hideaway. Come in.”

She pulled into a hover and waited for a reply.

“Pete’s Hideaway, here. Come back.”

“Yeah, this is the Gordon Class ship hovering east of you. The two-ninety. We’re looking for a place to stay, over.”

“Roger and welcome, you picked the right place. Anywhere you like. Those small huts with lotsa room around them are the heads. Over.”

Molly laughed. “Thanks for the heads-up. *Parsona* out.”

She hung up the mic and brought the ship down between two other craft a little nicer than her own. The thrusters sent up a puff of dust, blocking out the view through the windshield. Molly moved the Wadi to the back of her seat and crawled over the control console to go check in at the stable office. As she crossed the cargo bay, she felt a sudden surge of giddiness, a rare crack in her two weeks of loneliness and dour moods. She could feel it as she lowered the cargo ramp into the cloud of swirling dust outside: *today* was going to be her lucky day.

••••

“How many nights you need her stabled?” the man behind the counter asked. A patch on his coveralls said “Pete,” but it looked like a logo rather than a nametag. Molly pegged his age at sixty, but knowing Lok, it was probably a rough forty. They had skipped introductions, so she decided to think of him as Possibly Pete until she discovered otherwise.

“I’m not sure how long we’ll be here, to be honest.” Molly eyed the voting machine on his counter, the ‘L’ nearly worn off. “Should I pay as I go?”

“Yup, that’ll work. Just need you to fill out them papers. She need water?” Probably Pete bent down over the counter and squinted through a grime-streaked window in the general direction of *Parsona*. Like the pane of glass, Pete had a sheen of grease on him, almost like it oozed straight from his pores. Even his long hair, which fell out of a backward cap in stringy clumps, seemed coated in something foul.

“She need water?” he asked again, giving Molly a curious glance.

“Uh, no, but thanks. We filled up in Cramerton.”

“Cramerton? They got water out there?” Potentially Pete slapped the counter. “Don’t that beat all!”

Molly laughed politely, but wasn’t sure it was a joke. On her

mental to-do list, she added dropping another iodine tablet into the freshwater tank, just in case Possibly Pete's sense of humor wasn't intentionally dry.

"There you go," she said, handing back a form with mostly made-up information. She had checked the "Liberty" box under political affiliation to match his voting machine.

Probably Pete narrowed his eyes at the form, his hands coating the fresh paper with his oily perspiration. "Fyde," he said. "Wait a second—" He pulled off his cap and ran a tarry hand through his hair, the black on him so dark it verged on purple. "I *know* your ship. My Uncle Pete did some work on her once. What was your father's name?"

"*Is*," Molly corrected him. "His name is Mortimor—"

"Mortimor!" Poseur Pete slapped the counter, leaving another hand-print. "That's right! How's your old man doing?"

Molly shivered, a sudden wash of paranoia tickling her scalp. Two weeks of traipsing across her childhood home had teased her with a weak sense of nostalgia, but she never considered the chances of bumping into someone who might know her. She had been six when she left and could barely remember anything from her childhood.

"My dad? He's, uh… *fine*, I guess. We don't talk much anymore. He, um…"

"He split on you, did he?" Pretend Pete pulled off his hat and slapped the counter with it, smearing the grease there. Molly was beginning to pick up on his unique brand of non-verbal communication. It made her feel sorry for the counter.

"Don't that beat all?" he said, tugging his hat back on. "Never thunk him to be a runner."

"Yeah…" Molly didn't know what to say, figuring it didn't do any good to replace a misconception with a lie. "Do I pay now, or at the end of the day?" She clenched her fists, waiting for the reply.

"Each night up front, usually." He turned his cap the correct way and pressed the bill up with a single, blackened finger. "But we'll settle up when you get ready to go, how's that?"

"Thank you so much," Molly said, sighing. She smiled at him and relaxed her fist. Pretend Pete pulled out a slip of paper and shoved it across the counter, leaving a trail of purplish slime behind.

"The codes for the heads are on the back. TP's for sale in the ship store. If you need power for any reason, we have one thousand and two thousand amp hook-ups. No partyin' after three, and welcome to Pete's." He smiled at Molly. "I'm Pete, by the way. Pete the fourth. And that's my boy in the picture." He pointed a filthy digit at a curling print of film taped to the register. "That's the newest Pete. Pete the fifth."

He beamed with pride. Molly wasn't sure if it was for siring another Pete or being able to count that high—or maybe both.

"Nice to meet you," Molly said. "And good looking kid."

He rubbed one hand on his coveralls, the direction of the grease transfer questionable, and held it out to Molly. "Nice to meet you too, Molly Fyde."

She moved her hand into his nasty clutches as gently as possible. Penultimate Pete shook it, his grip firm and slick. She could feel her hand sliding around inside his palm and half expected it to pop out like a freshly caught fish.

Pete's lips pulled back in a smile so wide she could see his gums. A bright trace of purple gunk ran along the edges of his teeth.

"Molly Fyde," he said again, pumping her trapped hand.

••••

"Walter?" Molly poked her head into his room and then looked back through the cargo bay toward the cockpit.

"He left almost as soon as you did," her mother said through the intercom. "I almost said something—"

Molly glanced at the camera in the corner of the bay; it had begun to feel as natural as looking someone in the eye. "No, that's okay. I'm glad you didn't." Molly went to the sink and started washing her hands. "I guess this is what being a parent is like, right?" She shook her hands over the basin and reached for a towel.

"I wouldn't know," her mother said.

"Yeah… sorry, I wasn't trying to—"

"No, *I'm* sorry. I was just thinking out loud. And I want to remind you to be careful looking for Cat today. If she's still politically active, there's no telling what she's getting herself into."

"I'll be fine." Molly folded the towel, left it on the counter, and walked toward the cockpit. "I'm probably better off hunting her down without Walter, anyway. Oh, by the way, the guy who runs the stables knew Dad. Pete the fourth."

"Hmmm. Never heard of him. Must've been during the years I was out of action—after my body went to Dakura but before your father smuggled a copy of me off."

"Do you think I could ask him about the fusion fuel? He seems shady enough. Like, literally."

"Maybe. Could be dangerous. If Cat doesn't turn up, we'll give it a shot. Check in with me if you don't find anything."

"Okay. Is there anything else you want to tell me about her—?"

"Head's up," her mother said tersely. The speaker popped, the

intercom falling silent as Parsona killed the connection.

Molly heard footsteps on the boarding ramp and turned to lecture Walter on what “stay put” means.

But it couldn’t have been Walter stomping up the ramp.

He doesn’t have six legs.

7

Cole came to and made the mistake of opening his eyes. A stinging whiteness—more of that harsh light—invaded his retina like an infection just waiting for an open wound. Between the blows to the back of his helmet and the lance of photons, it felt as if his skull had been split wide open. He kept his eyes squeezed tight and tried to concentrate on his surroundings with his other senses.

Whatever he lay on seemed to be swaying with a gentle motion. He could hear a group of men talking and laughing in the distance. Over that, he heard the sound of runners plowing through snow, coupled with the rhythmic crunch of heavy weight on wet pack.

The temptation to crack an eye and look around was fierce. Even stronger, though, was his desire to avoid pain, which he knew would come with any more of the light. He tried to move his arms, but he could feel that they were tied in front of him. His elbows were also seized to his body and his wrists had been bound tight. They'd left him on his side, on a metal deck of some sort, and taken away his helmet and gloves.

Cole wiggled his elbows back as far as they would go and brought his hands up. Something kept them from coming all the way: a line that tugged between his hands and his feet. He bent over, curling into a ball, and was able to reach his mouth with his fingers, but couldn't get his wrists high enough to probe the knot with his teeth. He relaxed his body, giving up. They'd tied him up good. Almost as if they'd had plenty of practice.

Cole patted his chest and felt the mound in one pocket created by his red band. The knife was gone. If he remembered correctly, Riggs had it last. Thinking of his old friend—and not knowing what they'd done with him—very nearly caused him to open his eyes and look around. Cole cursed to himself. He curled his cold fingers around each other to warm them, and then he felt something hard across his chest.

The other welding plate.

The voices were coming from somewhere ahead of him, so Cole went into a tight fetal position and slipped the plate out of his pocket. Holding it by the edge, vertically, he brought his hand up to his chin and adjusted the plate until the other side pressed tight against one eye socket. His head was still woozy from the crash and the blows to his back, so he concentrated hard on which eye he was about to open before cracking it.

Light reflected around the edge of the plate, creating a halo of the brightest white that rimmed Cole's vision, but he could still squint and see. To either side of him stood bundles of gear—sacks and crates—all

tied to a metal deck with line made out of some natural-looking fiber. Beyond, he could see half a dozen figures, all covered in fur. They looked like wild game teetering on hind legs, smoke trailing out of their mouths as they yelled and laughed. A few of the men worked handles on a tall mast in the center of the deck, but the thing had no sail. It was just a flat, vertical bar with slits running up and down the length of it. The men kept working on something at its base. They would look up the pole, glance ahead, and then repeat the procedure.

Cole shut his eye to rest his retina from the halo of leaking light; he wiggled back against a pile of goods. One entire side of his body was almost completely numb from the cold metal, but he didn't want to attract attention by sitting up. He worked the edge of the plate tight to his face again and cracked his eye to look for Riggs.

There was no sign of him, but he couldn't see the entire deck. He craned his neck as much as possible, but the uncomfortable position and the constraints of his bound hands didn't give him much of a vista. One thing he did notice was the absence of snow on the deck. Looking past the fur-clad men, he could see it was still driving sideways in heavy sheets, but none of it was in the air around the little craft. He couldn't quite make out the bow of the ship, but something up ahead must've been splitting the flurries, sending the flakes to either side.

He raised his head to investigate, and one of the furry figures tapped another and pointed in his direction.

Cole froze. The alerted figure marched back in his direction, descending the few steps from the platform around the mast. At the base of the steps, the man stopped by a wooden barrel crisscrossed with ropes and pulled something from the lid—a mug of some sort. Stooping down in front of the barrel, he came up with a trail of steam rising from the mug, which wafted back in Cole's direction.

The smell got to him before the man did: chocolate with a hint of rum. Or more like rum with a hint of chocolate. Cole felt paralyzed with indecision, wondering whether it was better to hide the plate and await his fate in darkness, or stay alert and have it stolen from him. Before he could decide, the figure was before him, crouching down close.

"I'll have that," the man said, snapping the plate out of Cole's hand.

Cole squeezed his eyes shut and held them tight. The man's accent was a bit different from the others, but there was still a hint of something foreign in it, or perhaps something archaic.

"Who are you guys?" Cole asked, his own voice shaky from the cold and fear.

The response was a loud sip from the mug, then the figure

smacking his lips. Cole heard him put the mug down, followed by the sound of fluid being swished inside a vessel, like someone shaking a thermos back and forth.

“Who are we? We’re the same as you lads,” the man replied. “We’re the tainted.”

Before Cole could ask what that meant, he felt a wet rag laden with the smell of something chemical pressed to his face. He held his breath as long as he could, but he finally had to gasp for air.

As soon as he did—he was out again.

8

The Bern ship brought up from impound was far larger than Anlyn had expected. It was a warship, twice the size of the Ambassadorial craft she'd lost. She nearly balked and asked for another, wondering if she and Edison could operate such a craft for long periods of time.

The airlock hissed open, and a frazzled-looking pilot exited with his arms held high. Anlyn and Edison moved aside as the large Drenard squeezed past the duo to get to the control room. Bishar waved him through the door and thanked him, ushering him to the others who had stopped what they were doing to watch the bizarre confrontation.

"You aren't thinking clearly," Bishar said to Anlyn.

For a brief moment, she wondered if he was right. Perhaps setting off to aid Molly was just another way of running from home, from the looming war, from all her royal responsibilities. Maybe her *real* duty was back in Drenard's Pinnacle, sitting around the Circle where she could fight with words.

She shook the doubts away and backed toward the door, keeping the lance between her and Bishar. "Check the ship," she told Edison in English.

She stayed near the airlock, the weight of the lance and the bluff it represented already exhausting her. Edison disappeared inside.

"There'll be no foul play," Bishar assured her. "My actions will not be questioned when I write this up."

"I'm not in the most trusting of moods, Cousin. I've half a mind to take you with us to make sure nothing happens. I hope you can appreciate my honor for not doing so."

Bishar laughed nervously. "I do. More than you know. When you get to the rift, I'll have a barrier tug remove a few canisters. We'll replace some of the interior ones, but I won't have them out for long. If you hesitate to go through, I'll assume you came to your senses, and you can dock up back here. I'll gladly forgive these transgressions and have you as a guest for dinner. We'll prepare the finest Drenardian cuisine and eat in honor of the dead. Then we'll see about working toward justice come morrow."

"If you're sincere, I appreciate the offer. You've been more than fair."

After a few minutes, Edison stomped back through the airlock, his chest puffing as if after a great run. He spoke to Anlyn in English: "Vacated, by rough inspection. Single deck with a looped perimeter passageway. Adequate nourishment and spares, but absolute dearth of

armaments."

"You had the weapons systems removed?" Anlyn asked Bishar.

"Of course, but not just now. We do that for every ship we capture and impound." He glanced back and forth between the two of them. "Are you really planning on waging war with those who rule the rest of the universe?"

"I'm hoping I don't need to defend myself from friends and family before I get there," Anlyn replied.

A sudden sadness washed over Bishar's face, erasing the tension and anger. "I'm sorry we met like this," he said.

"As am I." Anlyn handed Edison his lance and bowed to her cousin, keeping her eyes on him all the while. He gave her a nod and a frown as she backed through the collar adapter and into the starship.

Edison followed. She left him behind to close the ship's door and secure the hatch while she rushed off alone toward the bow. As her bare feet padded along the steel decking, she tried to prepare herself for what must come next. She was about attempt something she had promised herself she'd never do again. Something she'd hoped to avoid for the rest of her days:

Fly.

••••

Anlyn had learned to pilot in the Royal Academy—just the rudimentary basics needed to qualify licensure and uphold ancient traditions for Drenardian royalty. She likened it to the Pheno people's habit of teaching their important females to ride Theryls, even if there was no chance of them ever taking one into battle.

Her real mastery of the art of space warfare came at Darrin, during the tumultuous civil war between the two planets and her time spent as an arm-dealer's slave afterward. She had spent more than a Hori cycle there chained to a cockpit, learning to kill and speak English while daily tortured by a vile human named Albert.

Since her flight into freedom just over a month ago, Anlyn had pledged to stay away from cockpits for the rest of time. She could imagine herself sinking back into a depression if she had to work in one—could see herself losing her sanity again. Now, she didn't know she had a choice. She couldn't ask Edison to take over for her while she cowered in a bunk; that was just a different sort of slavery, one self-imposed.

Anlyn jogged along the empty corridor, past a few crew quarters and a mess hall full of hastily stacked boxes. She went through a large

cargo bay and then finally came upon the dreaded place. She paused at the imaginary boundary between passageway and cockpit, that invisible line in the decking rising like some Darrin forcefield. She stood there for a moment, listening to the pounding of her own pulse. When she heard Edison stomping through the cargo bay, his gait drowning out the sound of her heart, she knew she could no longer delay. Summoning her courage, she stepped inside and approached the forward seating.

Her skin crawled as she pushed through the invisible barrier, the sight of the empty chairs filling her with a sense of dread. They were human-sized, just like *Lady Liberty's*, and nothing at all like the Drenard Ambassadorial ship. She rested a hand on the back of the nav chair and lifted one foot, using it to scratch her other ankle. It took her a moment to realize she was doing it. It took a moment longer to remember that the metal hoop of steel was no longer welded around her leg, the chain no longer coiled by her feet.

"Are you okay?" Edison asked. He spoke in Drenard, a sign he was communicating for *feelings*, rather than information.

"I'm fine," Anlyn lied. "Just worried about where you're going to sit."

"The removal of the armrest mechanisms will be elementary. I'll have the task performed prior to our intersection with the rift in spacetime." He bounded aft to search for tools, his switch back to English telling.

Anlyn felt a stab of annoyance, but she had herself to blame for lying to him. She wasn't worried about how poorly he'd fit in his seat, but how well she would in *hers*.

Walking around the outside of the pilot's seat, she noticed the Bern arrangement conformed to human standards: leader on the left. All the controls seemed familiar in layout, though covered in the Bern alphabet. It was one of those languages she recognized, even if she couldn't make out much of what it said. The stylistic swoops and curls were often printed in political cartoons back home; the Drenard translations below would say something funny or satirical about their sworn enemy.

Anlyn sat down and adjusted the harness straps. She figured out how to raise the seat while she waited on Edison to get back and translate; the pilot had left the thrusters running, but she couldn't tell which control released the clamps.

When she heard Edison set down a toolbox behind her, she turned and asked him which switch decouples the ship from the airlock.

"That one," he said, after scanning the dash a moment.

Anlyn thanked him, amazed at how quickly he'd picked up yet another language. His intellect occasionally threw up emotional

barriers in their relationship, but it often opened other sorts of doors. Like getting him on the Circle as the Cultural Counselor, for example. And now it served them well as he had become, through unspeakable tragedy, their mission's sole Bern translator.

Anlyn wrapped her pale blue hand around the control stick; she checked the needles on the gauges, making sure they were all between the black high and red low marks. She flipped the switch Edison had indicated and pushed away from the Keep.

Before she knew it—before her emotions could stage a revolt—she was flying again. Slow at first. Hesitant. But getting to the center of the Keep required a lot of twists and turns as she dodged around the trusses and steel beams built specifically to impede progress from Bern interlopers heading in the opposite direction.

As she weaved between the glass corridors, passing close to several, she could see her people lined up inside, blue hands spread out on the glass. Pairs of eyes tracked her passing, either wide with astonishment or narrow with accusations. Anlyn felt like a criminal, or a specimen arousing curiosity. Meanwhile, off to either side of her, sleek Drenardian starfighters kept pace, bobbing in and out of the mazelike structure while keeping their guns trained her way.

Just in case the specimen turns hostile, she told herself. She wondered if the rumored power of Edison's lance was all that kept them at bay.

As they progressed into the interior of the keep, the habitable corridors disappeared, and the density of the obstructing beams increased. Also, more and more of the gold canisters became visible—larger slivers and triangles of shimmering honey flashing out between the beams.

After a few tight, final squeezes, the three ships rounded into an open workspace where Anlyn could see several tugs pulling the blockade apart, creating a hole for her to fly through. A collection of replacement canisters stood nearby, another tug busying itself around them like a herder tending his flock.

Anlyn had to wait while they finished. She held the ship perfectly still as the two starfighters hovered to either side, their bows pointing straight at her. *As if we pose more of a threat than the rift ahead*, Anlyn thought. She tried to ignore them, as well as the hollow pit forming in her gut from having their weapons aimed directly at her. Instead, she lost herself in watching the tugs work. They pulled out several more layers of armored canisters—the innermost eaten away in places—until the rift was eventually exposed.

When the tear in space became visible, Edison grumbled something in English too obtuse for her to follow. In the recess of gold opened by the tugs, she could see empty space and stars beyond. A

few structures glimmered in the distance beyond that, like bright stars. It was an odd sight, for the tugs had only removed *half* the layers in one spot. The hole in space stood in *front* of the rear half of the rest of the golden cube. She and Edison were looking through them, rather than at them. And not *through* them so much as through a rip in the very fabric of the galaxy, a doorway to another galaxy that *was not theirs*.

Anlyn shook the wonder of the scene away, scared that Bishar's men would see her hesitation as a change of heart. She increased thrust, moving the large craft forward.

"How's the hyperdrive?" she asked Edison, wishing she'd boned up on some basic Bern during their flight from Drenard.

He pulled up a different screen on his readout. "Cycled and optimal."

They passed the outer boundary of canisters, entering a bright, golden cave. Ahead of them loomed a hole in space where the other half of the Keep should be. Anlyn continued to power the ship forward, slow and steady. She thought of all the brave men and women who had come on the mission with her, their lives lost. And *why?* Had she misread the prophecy? Was she misreading it again? No longer were they waiting for the Bern to show up—she and Edison were now going to *them*. Once more, it felt like a mistake. She wondered if their arrival in a Bern craft would give her and Edison more time to announce their arrival in peace, or if she and her love were about to join the rest of her mission in being reduced to dust.

The nose of the Bern ship broke the boundary between the two galaxies, and then the cockpit did the same. The walls of gold were suddenly replaced with tar-black space salted with an unfamiliar constellations of stars.

Before Anlyn knew it, she and Edison were out among them. The Keep was gone, and their massive warship immediately felt like a tiny speck drifting into the dark—piercing the vast and wild unknown.

9

Molly exited the cockpit preparing to scold Walter, but instead found three strangers stomping into her cargo bay: a human and two Callites. All three of them were enormous, and all three wore coveralls splattered with a purplish paint. Plumes of dust trailed them from outside, the kicked-up fog swirling around their feet.

"Excuse me—?" Molly was barely able to begin her question before choking on the nauseating reek of the figures. A foul gaseous cloud had entered with them—the smell of alcohol and sweat and something rotten. Molly nearly gagged as the human strolled up, appraising the interior of her ship with a smirk.

"Mortimor?" the man yelled. "You in here, you old bastard?" He looked over at Molly and smiled, as if they were all awaiting some gruff reply from her father.

None came, of course. Molly blinked the tears out of her eyes and covered her mouth with the back of her hand. "Can I help you?" she managed.

One of the big Callites plopped down in Edison's wide crew seat, his brown skin webbed with the outline of interlocking scales. The small plates gave their kind a reptilian look, despite the long, flowing hair most sported. And while the majority of aliens in the galaxy looked roughly humanoid, Callites took the similarities to another level. Human kids who painted themselves up as Callites for Halloween were almost indistinguishable from the real thing. The overall likeness didn't help the local tensions between them and Humans, of course. Differences in skin texture seemed to be quite enough for most people. If anything, the many other traits they had in common just made cohabitation *more* difficult.

While one Callite got comfortable in Edison's chair—his body sagging with obvious weariness—the other large male crossed over to the tool bench and picked up a power driver.

"Hey, don't touch that!" Molly said.

"It's okay," the Human said, walking over to her. "We're old friends of…" he looked pointedly at Molly's ring finger, which was helping shield her mouth and nose from the stench, "… your *boyfriend?"*

"My boyfr—? You mean my *father?* And he's not—hey, seriously, don't touch that!" Molly stepped toward the guy inspecting her tools, but the Human grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around.

"Mollie? Mollie *Fyde?*" He whistled, looking her up and down. "Drenards in hyperspace, is that you? My goodness, you've grown up. And *out!*" He stared directly at her chest. The massive beast in

Edison's seat looked at her as if to confirm the observation, and then started toying with the flight harness.

"I'm Scottie," the man said. He pulled her close, attempting to transform his grip on her shoulders into an embrace. Molly pushed against him, both hands on his chest, which left her mouth unguarded. "Scottie Paulson, your father's old friend."

His breath went right into her mouth, all over the surface of her tongue and back down her throat. It tasted like cheap liquor and cavities full of rotten meat. She gasped, which just drew the burn deep into her lungs. Molly visualized puking all over his coveralls but couldn't quite manage it.

She shoved on his chest, instead. "Get off!" she squeaked, bending back over the galley counter as he pushed forward. He easily weighed twice as much as she did. "Seriously—" Molly coughed. "Get off me!"

Scottie took a step back and chuckled to his friend by the workbench. "I just wanted a hug. Hell, last time I saw you, I could bounce you in my lap!"

"Look," Molly said. She held her hands out in front of her and scanned the three males. "I don't know where my dad is, so I can't help you guys. I'm gonna have to ask you to leave, okay? I was getting ready to go into town, and I won't be on-planet long, so I need to lock up and—"

"Lock up?" The Callite by the workbench waved a power shunt through the air. "But then we can't leave!"

"Good point, Ryn." Scottie studied Molly, grinning. "Be odd of you to lock us up inside here, wouldn't it?"

"Inside? I—no, you guys need to get out! My father isn't—"

"Here? Yeah, you said. Tell you what, we'll just wait for him to get back." Scottie walked aft through the cargo bay. "You go on to town and we'll keep an eye on things here." He poked his head into the engine room, then turned and smiled at the silent oaf in Edison's chair. "Check it out, Urg."

Molly moved to intervene as the large Callite rose and stomped across the cargo bay. It was as futile as trying to wave down a StarCarrier.

"Listen—" she said. But nobody was.

The large Callite disappeared into the engine room while Scottie moved aft, peering inside each crew quarter.

"Hey, you guys really can't—"

Scottie slapped his hand by Molly's door. "I call this one!" he told his friends. He looked at Molly. "Smells nice," he added, bouncing his eyebrows suggestively.

Molly wanted a gun. Plasma, laser, mechanical, she didn't care. She wasn't sure if anything would stop the two big fellows, but she

really wanted to try. She turned and looked at the security cam in the corner of the bay and saw it twitching to follow the action.

Molly frowned at the camera. She backed slowly toward the cockpit as the two Callites jostled with each other, both trying to squeeze into Cole's room at once.

••••

The cockpit door shut itself as soon as she stepped inside. Molly locked it, pulled up the cargo cam, and the Wadi jumped from the back of the captain's seat to her shoulders. She flicked on the radio.

"You know these guys?" she asked her mom.

"Never seen them before in my lives. Either of them."

"Either? Oh, you mean your lives. So are they're lying? What should I do?"

"It could be your father knew them when I was on Dakura. What you should do is go find the local law. Or Cat."

"You think the law's a good idea? What if they check the ship's name?"

"That won't be a problem. The local government hates the Navy as much as you distrust them. Besides, the Navy has a minimal presence here. Your father and I were sent undercover just as much to avoid bureaucratic wrangling over jurisdiction as anything else."

Molly leaned over the dash and looked through the carboglass toward the stable offices. She could see Pete standing by the door. He seemed to be squinting through the dust in their general direction.

"Okay, I'm gonna go for help. Can you lock the doors to the crew quarters?"

"No, but that'd be something nice for us to hook up."

"Yeah, let's make that a priority. I'll lock the cockpit from the outside. Keep an eye on things."

"That's all I *can* do," her mother said.

Molly nudged the Wadi to its favorite spot behind her neck and keyed opened the door. She snuck out, locked the door with her captain's codes, and then hurried toward the cargo ramp.

The mute oaf stuck his head out Cole's door and saw her leaving. "Hey," he said, proving to be not quite as mute as she had thought. He pointed at her, obviously trying to think of something else to say, while Molly jogged down the boarding ramp. She weaved through the stables, around and under the parked ships, and headed toward Pete. Hopefully he could help.

Before she got close enough to ask, however, he called out across the dusty lot, his hands cupped around his mouth: "Scottie and his

boys find you okay?"

"What?" Molly asked. "It's *not* okay they found me! Did you tell them where I was?"

"Hell, I called right after you checked in. Them boys been looking for your father for some time."

"He's not *with* me!" The Wadi scampered down the back of her shirt with the outburst, sticking its head in one of the baggy pockets on Molly's cargo shorts.

"That's right! You told me that didn't you?" Pete smiled at her and pulled his hand out of his coveralls. He had a toothpick sticking out of his fist, the exposed half dark purple. He put it in his mouth and used his tongue to slide it to the other side.

"I want them off my ship," Molly told him.

"Well, now, you'll have to talk to *them* about that." Pete leaned to the side and somehow spit a stream of dark juice past the toothpick. A long trail of the stuff hung from his lower lip, thick as molasses. He reached up and swiped it away with his palm, then rubbed it on his coveralls.

Molly looked at the stains covering him and wondered just how much of Pete's coloration was actual grease. If *any*.

"I tried to tell them to go," she complained. "But they wouldn't listen."

"Could be they think it's their ship," Pete said flatly.

"What? *Their* ship? That was my father's ship and now it's mine!" Molly looked down at the Wadi as it tried to curl itself into her pocket. Its tail swished in the air, then disappeared.

"Well, now." Pete spit again, dribbling it right down the front of his coveralls. The maneuver seemed to save him a step or two. "What I heard was your daddy owes Scottie some money. You never know with interest compoundin'—they might have a claim on her." He nodded toward *Parsona*. "Besides, why'd your daddy give such a fine ship away? How *old* are you?"

"Where's the sheriff's office?" Molly asked, ignoring the questions and cursing herself for allowing a tangle of lies to develop.

"Directly on Main," Pete drawled.

Molly turned and headed off in the direction of town.

"But he's gonna tell you just what I said," Pete hollered after her.

••••

Molly followed the busiest road into town. She preferred the thick plumes of dust from the traffic and the catcalls from the vehicles' occupants to the unknown of quiet streets. Especially with so much

dangerous politicking in the air.

Most of the cars on Lok were large-tired buggies suitable for travelling between towns with no interconnecting roads. They passed by in one of two speeds: slow—the people trying to sneak away from the trouble they'd just caused; and fast—the ones about to effect their own.

Ignoring offers for rides and things less-pleasant, Molly kicked at rocks along the shoulder and fumed over the idea of those brigands being on her ship and likely going through her things. The Wadi rode along across the back of her neck, its tiny claws gripping her shirt and a little flesh, its head lolling with her gait. Grumbling to herself, Molly walked past rows and rows of politicians smiling down from their posters and banners, all of them promising her something for just a few drops of blood.

She stopped at the outdoor counter of the first cantina she came to and bought water for herself and the Wadi. She chose her left pinky for the vote, even though it was swollen to the point of uselessness. Her new strategy was to sacrifice one digit completely so she could heal up the rest.

After paying, her Wadi curled across her forearm, leaning sideways with its back against her chest. Molly dripped water into its mouth, then took some for herself. Walking like that caused her to flash back to planet Drenard and that hot, arid, and dusty hike they'd taken together. The comparison of that horror-filled day to her current annoyance lifted her spirits somewhat. As long as she didn't look up at the fleet in orbit, she could pretend things weren't quite as bad as they could be.

Another buggy roared past, kicking a plume of chalk into the air. Molly could hear the powdery dirt crunching between her teeth, could feel it turning into a film of mud in her mouth. She took another gulp of water and tried to fight off the panicked sensation she sometimes felt in crowds—the need to run and escape from the noise and commotion, seeking the vacuum of space.

As she made her way into the center of town, her complete dearth of vivid memories of the place struck her for the first time. She seemed to remember visiting Bekkie with her father several times, but they were just memories of memories of memories, built up over a longer lifetime of forgetting. The only building she recognized was the tall church, its several spires sticking out over town. And even *its* familiarity was likely no more than a recollection from an old photograph, or a postcard that she'd seen more recently.

The noisy traffic gradually ground down to an even noisier standstill around the central square. Buggies with trailers unloaded goods, while Sisyphean storekeepers swept dirt back into the streets,

and pedestrians milled about through the gridlock amid a chorus of bleating horns. The town had a familiar odor and sound, a boisterousness that touched her nostalgia, but it also seemed bigger and more crowded than it had before.

Perhaps it was the political rallies, which Molly could hear in several directions. They mostly consisted of large groups of people chanting names or terse phrases that somehow captured an entire (and mostly vapid) platform. Or maybe the larger crowds had something to do with the Bern fleet. Perhaps rural Lokians had come to Bekkie in hopes of an affordable ticket off-planet, only to find the strange ships overhead weren't allowing anything of the sort.

Then again, not that many people in the crowd seemed to be looking up, at least not beyond the posters of smiling faces, all promising something. While Molly stressed about her family and friends and what seemed to be a looming disaster of galactic proportions, everyone else was worried about whether or not their candidate would be in power when it all came crashing down. What little politics she'd followed on Earth—a planet that never felt enough like home to get invested—seemed magnified and uglier on Lok. In yet one more way, the planet she had been born on felt incredibly foreign to her.

One thing she *could* remember about Bekkie, and something that hadn't changed, was the paucity of non-Humans in Lok's capital. After living on Earth with all its diversity for so many years—and having spent the last two weeks in the poorer countryside—Molly felt abnormally surrounded by her own kind. Oddly enough, it made her feel *more* conspicuous. She felt like the only alien in town, surrounded by nothing but Terrans, and therefore unable to blend in.

The sensation brought back a clear childhood memory of Bekkie, an emotion, really. As a kid, she'd only known a handful of people, all of them Humans, their faces blurred by time. She could remember a trip into town with her father once, how she'd expected to see so many new races, and how disappointed she'd been to see so few.

She wondered if that's where her fascination with aliens came from. The flight out to Palan had been so exciting—that long queue of diversity strung out just for her like a parade of exoticness. But did that make her a xenocist in a way? Pining for some exhibitionistic display of otherworldliness? Celebrating a thing *just because* it was different?

In the shops she passed, she did see a few Pherons and Callites working, usually with a smock on and some cleaning or serving prop in their hands. Both of their home planets were just a jump away from Lok, providing a nice source of cheap labor. The more Molly looked for them, the more she saw—but she really had to seek them out.

They blended too well with their environment, partly because of their camouflaging uniforms, and partly because they seemed so less kinetic, less boisterous, than their Terran counterparts. They seemed perfectly content—or trained, perhaps—to fade into the layered background to which they'd been relegated.

A loud crunching sound interrupted her scanning of the crowd; Molly looked down to find the Wadi eating the lip of the water bottle, the vessel sucked completely dry.

"No." She pulled the plastic out of the Wadi's mouth and moved the animal to her shoulders; she waved down an older couple passing by.

"Do you know where the sheriff's office is?" she asked them.

"Almost there," the gentleman said, eyeing the Wadi with some curiosity. "Everything okay?"

"Do what?" Molly asked. The man's genuine concern had thrown her off guard. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Thanks, though."

"Just keep going and it'll be on your right," his wife said.

"Thanks. Both of you."

The pleasant exchange felt odd after a few days of bad run-ins, mostly with shopkeepers. It reminded her that not everyone in the galaxy was evil scum out to kill her, take her blood, or destroy the universe. She wiggled her shoulders, trying to work some of the tension out of her body. She knew it wasn't good to let other people's rudeness dictate how she felt. She kept that in mind as she weaved through the crowd for another block. Finally, she spotted a building ahead with bars across the windows and recognized the painted silver star hanging over the door. Molly kicked her flightboots against the jamb, dislodging the chunks of caked dirt deep in the treads. She pushed her way inside.

The door hinged back with a creak, and bells jangled overhead. The office inside looked like a huge shoebox hewn out of rough lumber. Two shafts of dust highlighted the place, the particulate matter so dense in the morning sunlight that Molly considered ducking under them. In the back sat a table, pressed up against two of the shut cells. A prisoner in each cell sat close to the bars, their hands poking through and holding fans of cards. A young man sat at the table outside the cells. He wore a vest over a buttoned-up shirt, and a gun hung from his belt. Molly nodded to the three figures as she closed the door, setting off another racket from the bells.

Someone cleared their throat to Molly's side. She turned and squinted through one of the shafts of dust to find a man appraising her over a folded newspaper. He sat behind a desk, leaning way back in his chair, his old herder boots propped up on a smattering of loose papers. When he pushed his hat back with a solitary finger, Molly felt

like looking around for the holo cameras. The entire scene was so cliché, it had moved from comical, directly to spooky.

"No pets," the man said. He shaped his hand like a gun and aimed it at the Wadi.

"She's trained," Molly said. "She won't be a problem."

"Better not." His thumb decocked, and his finger came up a few inches with the imaginary recoil. He blew across the tip, smiled, and then holstered it away. "What can I do for you?"

Molly approached the desk, fighting the urge to swim through the shaft of lit dust with her hands. She glanced at the group of men playing cards, their faces slowly turning to follow her movement across the room. She noticed the walls were papered with election posters, rather than wanted posters. The only giveaway was the smiles; otherwise, even the actors would probably have been the same.

"I, um, have a problem with some men, Sheriff…" she bent forward and tried to read the name on his star.

"Browne," he said for her, looking down at the star as if he needed to be reminded. "And I ain't much help on marital disputes. Unless you need a lesson on starting a few."

One of the card players chuckled at this, and the Sheriff shot him a look, as if prisoners could have fun, but not at his expense.

"No, it's nothing like that. I just pulled in today, and some people claiming to be friends with my father—"

"Scottie?" Sheriff Browne interrupted. "You come in on *Parsona?*"

Molly swallowed. "That's right. And I—"

"Can't help you," the Sheriff said. His newspaper flapped back up in front of his face, and his hat sank down a few inches.

"Can't, or—"

"No pets, ma'am. I'm gonna have to ask you to leave."

"But I—"

"No *pets!*"

The Wadi's head recoiled from the outburst. Molly reached up and rubbed its back, trying to soothe it. "Could you at least tell me where I might find someone?" she asked. "I'm looking for…"

"Ain't no tourguide, neither."

"…a woman, a Callite that goes by the name of Cat."

The newspaper came down, just low enough to expose Browne's eyes.

"*Cripple* Cat?" he asked.

Molly looked to the card players. The other lawman gave her a huge smile. She turned back at Sheriff Browne. "Uh, I guess. I just know her as Cat. Or Catherine. Do you know where I can find her?"

The Sheriff pulled his feet off the desk and shot forward as his

boots fell heavily. Molly took a quick step back.

"You're lucky to know her as Cat. Most people don't." Browne shuffled some papers around on his desk and came up with a few stubs. He handed them out to Molly. "Twenty each."

"What are they?"

"Tickets to see Cat."

One of the card players chuckled again and got another visual blasting from the sheriff. Molly reached into her pocket for some change from the cantina and held it out. Sheriff Browne looked at the two coins.

"Just one ticket?"

"Just one," Molly said.

Her heartbeat quickened as she took the stub.

She was getting close, she could *feel* it.

10

Cole startled awake as if from a bad dream. His arms and legs jerked reflexively but wouldn't move; they were pinned in place. He blinked, gradually bringing the world into focus, fearing more of the bright light. What he found proved worse.

He was strapped to an inclined platform, his legs tied down a meter apart, the thick ropes looped around his ankles and through holes in the solid steel. He glanced up at his hands, which were similarly bound high over his head. He tried jerking down on them and felt his bruised ribs sing out in pain, jolts of electricity lancing from his chest to every new bruise across his body.

"Good luck with that," someone said.

Cole turned to his side. He had to lean his head forward to look around his own arm, then saw Riggs tied up a few meters away, strapped to an identical structure: an angled sheet of steel halfway between flat and vertical. He also noticed several empty racks scattered about the small room, all roughly arranged around a gated drain in the center of the floor.

"Couldn't tell if you were breathing or not," Riggs said. "Was gonna be pissed if you'd already died on me."

Cole grimaced. It felt like the room was swaying, but it could've been a problem with his head. He leaned it back against the steel and thought he could hear the crunching of snow reverberating up through the metal contraption and into his skull. He assumed they were still on the move, just in a bigger craft. Above, a ceiling of dark plastic allowed a wan glow of light to filter into the room. The spots were gone from his vision, but his headache lingered.

"How long have I been out?" he asked.

"No clue," Riggs said. "Longer than I was, obviously."

"Yeah," said Cole. He tried to push up with his restrained ankles to take some of the pressure off his ribs, but every movement caused him to wince in pain.

"Doesn't feel too good, does it?"

Cole looked over and saw a smirk on Riggs's face. He decided to roll with the jab, stunned that Riggs could actually take pleasure in Cole's condition as if he had nothing to fear himself.

"What do you think they want with us?" Cole asked, changing the subject and also trying to remind Riggs that they were on the same side and had a common enemy to worry about.

"I'm guessing it's nothing good, but at least they seem to want us alive. Maybe ransom. Surely they're not dumb enough to kill a Navy pilot, which means I'm probably safe. You still got no clue where you

jumped us?"

Cole wondered how best to tell Riggs that they might be in hyperspace. But then, he couldn't shake the doubt, the *feeling* that it had been an auditory hallucination. He couldn't even remember what he'd heard, exactly. He glanced down at his flightsuit, looking for the bulge of the red band in his breast pocket, but he was unable to tell if it was there or not.

"You didn't double-check your jump vector, did you? We could be anywhere in the galaxy right now, right?" Riggs groaned. "Flankin' *useless*."

Cole clenched his jaw to hold back the retort forming in his throat. He twisted his arm in the restraints, trying to force his thumb flat so he could pull it through the knotted rope.

"Well, at least they're Human," Cole told Riggs, trying to change the subject. "I think so, anyway. They were speaking English around me."

"I can do you one better. They speak Late-Millennial English."

"Do *what?* How can you tell that?"

"Junior Academy poetry reading." Riggs grunted; it sounded as if he were attempting to arrange himself more comfortably, or pull himself free. "I had to memorize that accent for a recital." He said the last in a strange voice, one that nearly matched what Cole had heard from the men.

"That doesn't make any sense," Cole said.

"What? Me in poetry class? Or that you either discovered time travel or jumped us to a frozen rock full of Late-Millennial poets?"

"They don't hit like poets," said Cole.

"Yeah, you're right, but they don't have to be poets, just from the same era."

"Twenty-first century?"

"Late. Or early twenty second. Jeez, man, did you sleep through English *and* history?"

"Yeah, I was more interested in Planetary Astronomy. Listen, I don't think we're on a planet. What would you say if I told you we were in—?"

A click of metal and an explosion of light cut him off. Cole shut his eyes and turned his head to the side as hinges squealed, and a door across the room opened. He waited until he heard it slam shut—returning the small space to a comfortably lit state—before reopening his eyes. He blinked rapidly and tried to focus on the shape shuffling toward him. Several men wrapped in fur had joined them in the cramped space. Two of them crouched down on either side of the door, their goggles off and dangling around their necks. One had the fur over his face pulled down, exposing a snarl.

The third man approached Cole and Riggs. He slowly pulled his goggles off and pushed his arm through the strap to secure them around his elbow. His face was completely covered with strips of fur, dotted with melting snow. Reaching up, the man began unwrapping himself, gradually revealing a tan face with a leathery complexion and a head topped with a mop of bright, blonde hair.

A mouth was exposed, smiling, his white teeth standing out against a rich tan and the dark creases in his skin. The man looked like a surfer—like someone who had spent his entire life on the beach. Cole had a hard time matching that neck-up look with the garb for an endless winter.

"What do you want with us?" Riggs asked.

The man turned to him. "A few answers," he said calmly. "Oh, and then your undying loyalty, of course." His smile broadened. His voice was warm, deep, and thick with a forgotten accent. It harkened back to a time when English was spoken by a minority of Humans, back before it gathered the rich pronunciations that would come with universalizing the language. It reminded Cole of some old pre-holo vids, flat stuff he had watched in Portugal as a kid.

Riggs laughed. "Not the best way to win us over, asshole!"

Cole ground his teeth together, wishing Riggs would calm down. He watched the blonde man pull off his gloves and tuck them into his belt. Every motion seemed both purposeful and relaxed. An odd combination, yet seductive, like watching an expert perform some complex task without pause or worry, just sure precision. The man reminded Cole of one of his old flight instructors: rugged and handsome in an ageless way, a guy who could speak through a smile and somehow make you want to follow him anywhere.

"Actually, Captain Riggs, we've found this to be the *best* way to win people over."

"Do I know you?" Riggs stammered.

"You may've heard of me," the man said. "My name's Joshua. Joshua O'Connell."

Cole felt a twinge of recognition; he looked to Riggs, who was shaking his head.

"How do you know who I am?" Riggs asked.

The man laughed. It was like warm honey being poured into Cole's ears. The two men by the door joined in, whether by some shared joke or sense of duty, it was hard to tell.

"Your name's on your flightsuit," Joshua said, pointing at his chest.

The two men by the door laughed harder. Cole watched Riggs turn red as he glanced down at his chest. Cole did the same, looking at his flightsuit from *Parsona*, the one with Molly's father's name on it.

Joshua waved down the two hyenas by the door and smiled warmly at Riggs. “Normally, I leave these orientations to my subordinates. They break you down, I build you up, that sort of thing. However,” he turned to Cole. “*You* are causing quite the stir. Got people whispering all up the chain of command. Enough to make my new boss pay a visit.”

“He’s nobody,” Riggs said. “A flunky. You leave him be.”

Cole glared at Riggs, begging with his eyes for him to be quiet.

“Now, now, lads.” Joshua clapped his hands in front of him and left them clasped. The double-fist moved up and down as he spoke. “Let’s not think about what you should or shouldn’t say to me. My advice? Just skip the resistance bit. Assume we’re already the best of friends.” He spread his hands out to include the two goons by the door. “All of us will be on the same team before you know it. The sooner, the better.”

“Cool,” said Riggs. “When do *we* get to dress in coon skins and tie *you* guys up?”

Joshua’s smile faded. His bright eyebrows came down over his eyes, draping his sockets in darkness. “Look, boys, I know you have a lot of that Academy nonsense rattling around in your skulls, lord knows we get our share of noobs here—”

“Noobs?” Riggs asked.

Joshua turned to him. His eyes were bright, despite the dimness of the light filtering through the dark ceiling above. “Newbies,” he said. “People that don’t know how to calculate proper jump coordinates.” He walked over to stand close to Riggs; Cole followed with his eyes. “I don’t know where you kids thought you were jumping to, but something got in your way.” He spread his arms. “Welcome to hyperspace. Now let’s stop annoying me with questions and start soothing me with answers.”

“Hyperspace?” Riggs leaned forward against his restraints. “What are you talking about?”

Joshua started to say something, but he turned instead to Cole. His mouth remained hinged open, hovering around a half-formed word. Slowly, his frozen expression transformed into a smile. He snapped his fingers at the two men by the door.

“Why aren’t you just as surprised?” he asked Cole as the other men crossed the room.

Cole pulled against the knots around his wrists, dragging himself up the incline as much as he could. He took a deep breath once his diaphragm had the weight off and then slid back down. He felt winded just from being tied up in the position; it wasn’t conducive to long conversations.

“I’m shocked speechless, is all,” he finally said.

The two men walked toward Riggs, disappearing from view behind Cole's arm. There was a loud screeching noise as they pushed Riggs's rack around, lining up the base with the drain on the floor. One of the goons approached Joshua and held out his hand.

Reaching in a fold of his furs, Joshua brought out a bag of purple fluid and handed it to the guy, who set it on the ground near the drain.

"What's your story?" Joshua asked.

"I'm just a noob," Cole said, repeating the strange word but without the ancient accent. "A flunky, just like he said."

Riggs shook his head. "Don't tell them anything!" With his rack adjusted, Cole could now see him without straining his neck.

Joshua signaled to one of the goons; the man dug a thumb in Riggs's armpit, causing him to gurgle with pain.

"What can it hurt?" Cole asked his old friend, pleading with him to go along so whatever happened, they'd do it quick.

"Precisely," said Joshua, turning to Riggs and waving the goon off. "The only way it *hurts* is if you refuse to talk." He turned back to Cole and lowered his voice. "Who did you contact with the D-band?"

"The *what?*" Cole scanned the three men. "Wait, what year do you think it is?" He wondered if Riggs's time-travel joke had any merit—

Joshua shook his head. "We know what year it is, now stop asking questions and start answering them. Who did you contact with the band?"

"Nobody," Cole said, wondering how they even knew what the thing was for. "I heard some voices, that's all." He glanced over at Riggs. "Please don't hurt him."

"What did the voices say?"

"That you were coming. And welcome to hyperspace."

"You *knew?*" Riggs hissed. Cole turned to his friend, saw his eyes wide with astonishment. Riggs grunted in agony as the goon dug his furry mitt into his ribs again.

Cole grimaced with empathic pain and looked away. He turned to Joshua. "Please stop," he begged.

"Are you coming from Lok?" Joshua asked.

Cole swallowed and shook his head.

"Speak up."

"Never been there."

Joshua pointed a finger at him. "But you know something, don't you? You recognized the name of the planet."

"I've heard of it."

"But not as part of an invasion? Maybe an alien force with a different name?"

"No."

Joshua's finger shook. "Tell me what you know about Lok or I'll have your friend's limbs removed."

One of the goons laughed. Joshua snapped his fingers in the man's direction and the goon fell silent. Cole stole a glance at Riggs, whose lips were pursed thin and tight.

"I know someone who was born there. That's all."

"*Do* you, now?"

There was a knocking at the other side of the metal door. The three men put on their goggles; Riggs leaned away as the man beside him let go of his neck. One of the goons walked over to the door and opened it, letting in a flash of light.

"What is it?" Cole heard Joshua say, his own face averted and his eyes closed.

"Our esteemed guest is on deck, sir," he heard a voice say.

"Excellent. Tell him we'll be there in a minute."

"He wants you right away, sir."

"And *I* want you to stall. Take him to the mast if he's impatient, that way we'll be there before he knows it."

"Yes, sir." The door banged shut; Cole opened his eyes and waited for them to adjust to the relative darkness. Joshua stood in front of him, his goggles now down around his neck, his hand reaching into his fur coat. "What's your name?" he asked Cole.

"Mortimor," Cole said, looking down at the patch on his suit.

"No, it's not." Joshua pulled something out of the folds of fur—two cylinders of wood, bright and polished. "I recognize the getup. I know you're not him."

"You've got me confused for someone else," Cole said. "Where I come from, it's a common na—"

"Do you know what this is?" Joshua asked. He held the two cylinders up for Cole to see, gripping them in a single fist, side-by-side.

Cole shook his head.

"Ever heard of the Luddites?"

"I know what a luddite is," Cole said. He snuck a quick glance at Riggs, who seemed livid and confused by the discussion—his forehead was full of wrinkles, but his jaw kept clenching and unclenching.

"*The* Luddites," Joshua said. He held one of the glossy cylinders away from his body. The other one dropped toward the ground and then stopped, hovering in mid-air less than a meter below its twin.

"The terrorists?"

All three of the men laughed. "No, not terrorists, my friend. *Freedom fighters*. We were once devoted to liberating mankind from the technology that blinded them to a good life."

"You preferred to die toothless and young, is that it?"

Cole regretted saying it as soon as it came out. He tensed for a blow, but none came. Eying Joshua warily, he saw a thin smile creep across the man's face.

"There were some… *flaws* in our worldview, sure, but we have a much higher purpose now. We now know and understand mankind's failings, and we're working to fix them. However," he twisted his outstretched hand slightly and the levitating stick swung in the air, "we still loathe technology. Deep down—the original members who are still with us—we prefer the *simple* things in life."

Carefully, Joshua reached below the hovering wooden handle and grasped it with his other hand. He then brought both of the cylinders parallel to the ground while keeping them apart.

"Simple is always better, don't you think?"

Cole raised his eyebrows.

"The wire between these two pieces of wood is constructed almost entirely out of carbon. Lovely, beautiful carbon. The matrix of *life*."

He moved the handles closer, but Cole still couldn't see a thing.

"The strand is just a few atoms wide, and yet, it is nearly unbreakable, held together by the natural forces of electromagnetism. Gorgeously simple, really." Joshua's eyes changed focus, away from the nothingness and fixed on Cole. "Do you know what that makes this lovely wire?"

"Easy to lose?" Cole joked.

Joshua tilted his head to the side and smiled. "It makes this the sharpest thing in the universe." He turned to the goons beside Riggs and nodded. The man with his wrappings down off his mouth smiled, his shaded eyes darting toward Cole before he knelt down and yanked Riggs's pantleg out of his boot. He unzipped the expander on the side of the flightsuit's leggings, then slid the black fabric up past Riggs's knee. He pulled hard, bunching the material in a band so tight around his thigh, that Riggs grimaced in pain.

Cole stared at Riggs's exposed, pale leg and noticed for the first time a trough in the rack right behind the thigh, running from side to side. The goon performed the same ritual on the other pantleg, unzipping the boot expander and yanking the material up high.

"What do you want to know?" Cole asked.

Joshua flashed the briefest of smiles, there only for an instant. He frowned and shook his head. "For starters, I want you to stop asking me questions. I want the both of you to concentrate instead on spilling your guts."

The goons laughed at this. Joshua nodded to one of them and jerked his head toward Cole; the man came over and stood by his side. Cole expected him to jam his fingers in his ribs or armpit, just as he

had with Riggs, but the man clamped his hand over his mouth, instead.

He pulled Cole's chin to the side, forcing him to watch as Joshua knelt down in front of Riggs with the two handles held far apart. Cole saw his friend's boots twitch, straining against the ropes. Riggs tried to yell something, but the other goon clamped his hand around his mouth, forcing the two former friends to look at each other. Riggs's eyes were wide, his nostrils flaring with desperate, shallow breaths.

Taking extreme care, Joshua slowly inserted one of the handles in the rack's trough and fed it behind Riggs's legs until it slid out the far side. He again grasped both handles and held them far apart, his muscles straining as if pulling the invisible thread taut. He looked back at Cole and smiled, then turned to Riggs's legs.

Cole could feel his own eyes bulging as he shouted into the furry mitt covering his mouth. His cheeks filled with the muffled roar of his own voice as Joshua brought the handles toward his chest. Cole *knew* Joshua would turn to him, would give him one last chance to speak before he did anything bad. Or maybe it would all be a cruel joke. A hazing ritual. A prank meant to bond them together.

But Cole was wrong.

There was almost no effort in what Joshua did. He brought the two handles together in front of Riggs's thighs, switched them to the opposite hands, and then pulled them away from one another. Cole couldn't even tell if the motion made a sound over his own muffled pleas.

Riggs's face remained frozen for a moment, then his face twisted up in confused concentration, almost as if he were fighting to place a smell. Cole tried to breathe through his nose as Joshua stood back and began rolling one of the handles in the air, sucking the other one up to it.

The real horror didn't begin until the goon by Riggs let go of his mouth and reached for the purple bag. Riggs struggled against his restraints, grunting. One of his thighs came away from the rack.

His boot didn't.

Cole gaped in sick disbelief at the lower half of his friend's two legs, both of which were still strapped to the rack. There seemed to be a long delay before the thighs began jetting blood, splattering the boots and running down the steel toward the drain. The thighs kicked even more as Riggs writhed in horror. Cole's head filled with a dull roar—his own moans reverberating through his skull, back into the steel rack, then echoing in his ears. It gave his rage a metallic tinge, like fear and hate wrapped in foil.

He could barely hear Riggs scream as the goon began slapping purple goo on the ends of his stumps. Thick pulses of blood sprayed

through the man's fingers before he could get it stopped. It came in rapid, forceful spurts, a visual measure of Riggs's racing heart.

After what felt like minutes of struggle and abject terror, Riggs's head finally fell forward, his jaw slumping to his chest. Blood continued to leak out of his legs; the man tending to them paused for a moment, licking some of the purple goo off the back of his hand.

The man holding Cole's face let go and stepped away. Cole tried to suck in a lungful of air, but before he could, he heard his own disbelieving wail leak out, the last of his held breath forced into a whimper vying to become a scream:

"What the flank? What the *flank!"*

Part XII – Lessons Learned

"The surface confounds with its visibility.
Truth always lurks beneath."

~The Bern Seer~

11

Molly stepped out of the sheriff's office and back onto the crowded sidewalk. She looked down at the ticket stub she'd just purchased. There was no name on it, just a date, time, and place: that very night at eight o'clock, the opera house. Lok's extremely short days meant she didn't have long to wait, but it also meant skipping a shift of sleep. She tried to calculate how long she'll have been up by the next nightfall—when the Wadi's claws dug sharply into her shoulder, breaking her concentration.

She turned to chastise the animal, then saw it had cowered down low to peer over her shoulder at something. Following its eyes, she looked across the street and spied Walter walking amongst the crowd.

Molly let a buggy go by, its un-muffled engine blatting loudly as it revved up to cajole the buggy ahead of it. She ran across the street behind it, hot exhaust blasting her bare knees. Weaving through the foot traffic, she took long strides to try and catch up to Walter. The boy was walking unusually fast and quite close to the two Humans just ahead of him.

She nearly caught up to him when a ruckus occurred. Some kid came out of an alley right in front of the couple. The boy collided with them, sending the woman to the dirt, and then ran off without even apologizing. Molly rushed forward to help her and her husband, to see if they were okay. Shockingly, Walter did the same. He steadied the man by the hips to make sure the gentleman didn't go down as well.

"Are you alright?" Molly asked the lady as she helped her up.

"Little snot came out of nowhere!" she said, brushing the dirt off her knees.

"Now Sandra, it was just an accident." The gentleman patted Walter on the back. "Alright lad, I'm fine. Thank you very much." He smiled at Molly and tipped his wide-brimmed hat. "Thanks for your assistance, young lady."

"Molly!" Walter said. He glanced up and down the street as the couple merged with the crowd and disappeared. "What're you doing here?"

"I'm looking for the person who's gonna help get us *out* of here. What're *you* doing?"

"Nothing," Walter said. He thumbed through folds of paper in his hand. "What wass her name again?"

"Cat. I've told you that a hundred times." She pulled him out of the middle of the sidewalk so the crowd wouldn't have to part to get around them.

"I think I found her," Walter said.

Before Molly could respond, a young boy forded the river of foot traffic and tugged on Walter's elbow. Walter turned and pushed him away, hissing softly.

"Did you just give that kid something?" Molly asked.

"What?"

"Was that the kid from the alley?"

"Huh? No!" Walter turned and resumed thumbing through something in his hands. All Molly could see was the top of his stubbled, metallic head, which seemed to be glowing a little. He turned around and pressed a wad into Molly's hands. She looked at them: a thin stack of tickets, all to that night's show at the opera house.

She shook them at him. "Where did you get these, Walter?"

"People gave them to me."

"*Gave* them?" She reached out and grabbed a fistful of his flightsuit, pulling him close. "Where did you get them? Did you *steal* them?"

"No! They're free!" he squealed.

Molly glared at Walter and had a visual of spanking him, right there in public, age be damned. "C'mon," she said, pulling him back across the street. She veered toward one of the many outdoor cafes lining a busy side-alley.

Walter pried her fist off his cuff and grabbed her hand. As they crossed the street, he practically skipped along beside her, trying in vain to interlock his fingers with hers.

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A few minutes later, Walter sat across a small café table from Molly, sulking. He took his finger out of his mouth and asked, "Why can't we go back to the sship?" He pouted and resumed sucking on his digit.

Molly took a sip of her water, which she had made Walter vote for, then leaned back in her seat. "I already told you, some bad people are setting up camp in there, and the sheriff won't have anything to do with them. Besides, I don't wanna miss our chance at finally tracking this Cat character down."

"So let'ss go get ssome gunss," Walter said. Molly glanced away from him and over his shoulder. Two Callites were walking down the alley, both wearing coveralls splattered with the same purple paint Scottie and his friends had sported. She watched them curiously over the lip of her glass.

"I ssaid, let'ss get ssome gunss," Walter hissed.

“Get them where? Guns are illegal here.” Molly reached into her glass and pulled out a cube of ice. She squeezed it between the pads of her fingers to numb the persistent soreness there. “That’s why you don’t see people on Lok shooting at each other.”

Walter looked down at his computer for a moment, then back up at Molly. “How do you protect yoursself from whoever’ss in charge?”

“Look around you, pal—this isn’t Palan. A bunch of pirates aren’t gonna take over and let the last people out of prison before putting some different ones in. It doesn’t work like that here.” She raised her voice as she talked, speaking over a protest marching down Main street. Someone on a bullhorn was promising to handle the Drenard invasion differently, and also to get rid of the ships overhead, if only the electorate would throw the current bums out and install him in their place.

“But if the ssheriff won’t help, and he’ss the one with the gunss, how do we get the sship back?”

“I don’t know. Hopefully they’ll be gone by the time we return. I think they were looking for someone else, anyway. Maybe they’ll give up. Anyway, we’re just gonna hang out here until the show. We need to find out about the fusion fuel. That’s the most important thing right now.”

“I thought we had plenty of fuel. You don’t tell me anything.”

“Yes I do. I’ve told you a dozen times, you just don’t listen. We need a different kind of fuel or we can’t get back from where we’re going. Besides, this lady might be an ally, which we’re in desperate need of. Our crew has dwindled down to—”

“*I’m* your ally!” Walter said, beaming.

“Yeah?” Molly took a long pull from her water, and then fished for another cube of ice. “Where in hyperspace were you this morning when I needed you?”

Walter frowned and looked back down at his computer; he’d hardly touched his food. Molly wondered if she should give the plate to the Wadi. She looked down at the creature, which was curled up in her lap, chewing on the tablecloth.

“Are you still not in yet?” Molly asked Walter.

He shook his head, which seemed to glow with an inner light. It was a sign she’d begun to recognize as either shame or excitement. Not knowing which made for some interesting interpretations of his moods.

“Seriously? You can crack a StarCarrier mainframe and remotely hack a Navy-issue missile, but you can’t get a wireless signal in a cafe? Look, just let me pay for it.” She glanced at her poor pinky, rationalizing the sacrifice.

Suddenly, the roar of thrusters in the atmosphere caused

everyone in the café to glance up. It sounded at first like another Bern ship heading off to orbit, but they were too far from the rift for it to be that. She and Walter joined the rest of the patrons in searching the sky for the source.

She finally spotted the vertical plume from the lift-off. The tiny ship at its head didn't match up with the sonic boom it created, as the sight of it reached them well ahead of the lagging noise. It was a strange optical illusion: a silent ship being chased by the grumble of an invisible one. It was especially unnerving as Molly still had not gotten used to *hearing* spacecraft move.

She looked away from the ship and watched the other patrons follow the scene. They soon began arguing politics amongst themselves, often saying something about Callites and immigration laws.

Walter peered down at his computer, frowning. "Coffee sshopss are *much* tougher than Naval encryption," he said, still smarting over her jab at his technical prowess. "They update their sstuff weekly—the Navy takes decadess. Thiss sshop csycle'ss its passsword every half-hour and they usse ten twenty-four bit encryption." He took a sip of his gelatte and wiped the foam off his lips with the back of his hand. "If the Navy took half thesse precautsionss, you'd probably be dead."

He smiled up at her. "Twicse," he added with a grin.

Molly glared at him over the lip of her glass. "You can't die twice __"

A gasp from the upward-gazing crowd cut her off. Molly shielded her eyes and looked up as well. A second later, the distant roar of the spacebound ship went silent. As she followed the plume of exhaust upward to locate the ship, she saw the craft tumbling down past the pillar of smoke it had created, bow spinning over thrusters, over and over.

Everything in the café froze as the patrons watched solemnly, waitresses frozen in place with pitchers of water dripping condensation. When the plummeting hull disappeared behind the building's awning, there was a distant rumble, the sound coming from many kilometers away. Everyone gradually looked back to their food. Forks tinked against plates. Whispers began to grow back into conversations.

Molly took it all in, desperate to know what had just happened. Were they testing some kind of new craft? Something to use against the fleet? Everyone else seemed to know something, or at least they weren't terribly shocked by the display. She leaned over to ask a nearby table, when Walter hissed excitedly.

"I'm in," he said, his face glowing. He bent over the computer, typing furiously and sneering.

Molly reached across the table. “Let me see it.”

Walter continued to peck away.

“Walter, it’s important. Give it here.”

He frowned and handed over the computer. “Won’t be long before you’re kicked off,” he said.

Molly nodded and moved to swipe the top screen away, then noticed it was Palan’s planetary homepage. The weather forecast was being displayed, showing the projected hour for the next rains. She glanced up at Walter, who was looking back over his shoulder at a political dispute in the alley. She felt a sudden pang of sadness for him as she realized he must be feeling homesick.

Swiping the page to the side, Molly dragged up a new one from the bottom. The few times they’d been connected to the Net in the past two weeks, the datastream had been too thin to do even the most rudimentary of tasks. The remote Lokian villages had suffered from poor connectivity and bandwidth, even when they were lucky enough to find an available signal. A seemingly countless number of items had built up over the past weeks that she really wanted to check on, but first there were a few she *had* to.

Using the virtual keyboard, she typed: “Molly; Fyde; Navy,” and hit enter. Hundreds of hits registered, but she could see most of them were junk. Lots of false positives and a ton of spelling suggestions for “mollified.” She sorted the results by date, looking for something recent, but there wasn’t anything within the last two months.

She swiped that away and tried: “Parsona; Ship; Navy.”

“You looking for newss about thosse sshipss?” Walter asked. “The oness from the bright light?”

“No. I probably know more about them than the Bel Tra do. Not that that’s saying much. I’m actually looking for news about us. Trying to find out how much trouble we’re in.”

Walter pushed up from his chair and leaned forward. “You ssearching on Latticse?” he asked.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about—”

Walter leaned over the table and snatched the computer away from her. He pecked furiously at the keys while Molly tried to snag it back. “I said not to worry about—”

Walter relinquished the computer. Molly glanced at the screen and nearly dropped the device. She looked behind herself, scanned the crowd, then moved the tablet to her lap and stared at the screen.

It showed the welcome page for the GN Naval database.

“How did you do that?” she whispered.

“Eassy. I already had the passsword.” He slurped through ice cubes for the last of his drink, then looked around for their waitress.

“Is this how you hacked the missiles?”

He frowned at her as if the question didn't merit answering. "Completely different," he said.

The waitress came up from behind. Molly moved the computer under the table and threw her napkin over it. Some more water was sloshed in their glasses—their one free refill. Walter was told the gelate top-up would cost. He demurred, peering at the pads of his fingers. Molly glared at him, jerking her head to the side to let him know she needed some privacy.

He finally said "no thankss," and the waitress moved on. Molly placed the computer on the table as the Wadi munched on her napkin. She looked over the welcome page for the Navy database, the appearance of the familiar site filling her with memories of the Academy. The only difference was the tall stack of red bars running down one side of the screen, indicating her current clearance level. She had no idea it even *went* that high.

Pulling up the keyboard display, she repeated her search query from Lattice and hit enter.

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Classified. Zebra Log. 2148.08.12.2214.

Today, at precisely 1934 UTC, the 12th of Eight 2148, two prisoners (Molly Fyde and Ensign-II Cole Mendonça) escaped from Star Carrier Zebra with the aid of an informant (Walter Hommul) and a suspected Navy accomplice (Captain-III Jason Riggs). Along with their escape, Zebra command suffered the theft of a loaded and armed Firehawk (s/n 492857295-F) and an impounded craft (GN-290 *Parsona*). The latter had already been deemed both a C-8 High Target and an L-10 Object of Interest.

Memo: Escape was effected by the use of a high-level hack of StarCarrier Zebra's mainframe and the re-routing of personnel. All, repeat, ALL Navy admins should change their login and password information immediately and begin cycling them according to Navy regs.

Memo: Whereabouts of both craft unknown at this time, but hyperspace signature for stolen Firehawk was found and traced by the science team on the Cruiser Sagan. Whether or not the result was a case of negligent navigation, a suicide mission, or an attempt to cover their tracks remotely, has yet to be determined. The hyperspace signature led straight to the core of Delphi's primary star, leaving a trace strong enough to drown out *Parsona's* exit coordinates. A deeper

analysis of the trace will be performed, as will further scans for *Parsona's* trajectory.

Memo: All targets and personnel in this case have been upgraded to L-15 Objects of Interest. Zebra command takes full responsibility for the loss, but gladly accepts the High Admiral's confidence and charge of reclaiming the Navy's property.

Memo: Please reference Palan Log 2148.06.23.0715 for more on Mendonça and Fyde. The same suspects were involved in the death of three Navy staff and the destruction of Navy property. They were subsequently assigned L-5 ratings, each.

Memo: Please reference Earth Log 2148.07.18.1640.3 for even more on Mendonça and Fyde. The same suspects were involved in the death of Rear Admiral Lucin and an attack on other Navy personnel. They were both upgraded to L-10 Objects of Interest following the events detailed therein.

Admiral Griffin Saunders

Z-HQ StarCarrier Zebra

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Molly scanned the report one more time, frowning at the results of the hyperspace signature scan. Somehow, it actually felt comforting to know what had happened, that Cole had definitely jumped into an object with mass and would likely have ended up in hyperspace. But how had he mistakenly jumped into a *star*? Did Riggs play some part in that? She peeked up at Walter, who was holding his empty gelate to the sun as if to make the ice melt faster.

The database search also showed the older memos linked to the most recent one. She glanced over the one detailing her and Cole's escape from the Academy, but she didn't read it. She could get lost in that memory: the door banging, Lucin yelling, the silent shots, just a crinkle of glass and a life ended…

The overall image created by the search results made her feel nauseous. Two escapes, several deaths, theft of Navy property, and a string of violence. She couldn't imagine what more the higher-ups would be saying about her if they weren't so busy dealing with the Bern invasion overhead, or the rumored expansion of Drenard hostilities.

Her mother, of course, had insisted that none of this was her fault, that perhaps things foreseen couldn't be stopped—but Molly

didn't believe that. The mistakes she'd made, with the Navy and now on Lok, it was Glemot all over again. But unimaginably, *impossibly*, on an even larger scale.

"You're wassting the connection," Walter hissed.

Molly shook her head and looked back to the screen. She tried searching for: "Cat; Catherine; Lok," but once again got too many hits to weed through them or make sense of it all. Most went too far back to be the correct person. She cleared the computer screen and handed it to Walter, then thought about the odd fatality count reported from Palan. She felt certain *four* people had died in those flooded streets. And yet: Lucin, Saunders, and now the official reports all claimed three. Did someone survive the rains? Or did they just not find the body?

"We're in *trouble*," Walter hissed.

Molly snapped her head around, her hands moving to the table and ready to push off, to flee or fight. The Wadi, asleep in her lap, jumped up and hit its head on the bottom of the table and came out woozy. But Walter was just looking at the computer. She could see the reports she'd just found back up on the screen.

"Close that stuff out!" she hissed at him. "And you nearly gave me a heart attack."

He looked up. "Ssorry, but if you didn't want me to ssee it, you sshould've cleared the hisstory tab."

Molly settled back down, her heart racing. "No, Walter, that's not the way it works." She patted the Wadi on the head, comforting it, then leaned forward, hoping he'd see how serious she was. "If I wanted you to see what I was looking at, I would've left it up or shown it to you, understand? You can't take stuff that's not offered to you. At the very least, you need to learn to ask."

"Why? If *I* don't take it, ssomeone elsse will. What'ss the differencse? It'ss sstill taken, but then I don't have it."

"You shouldn't even *want* something stolen. You—haven't you ever had someone *give* you something?"

"No, not—" he looked down at his flightsuit, his name scrawled across the breast with a black marker. "Thiss," he said, placing one hand on his chest.

"Okay, and how do you feel about that flightsuit? You love it, right?"

Walter nodded.

"More than that computer, am I right? And yes, I know you stole the computer from your uncle back on Palan."

Walter looked at his computer, then ran his fingers over the bare patch of material on his suit where he had printed his name.

"I like the computer better," he said.

Molly threw her hands up. “Oh, forget it.” She threw some credit chips on the table for a tip and shooed the Wadi up to her shoulder.

“C’mon, I think the waitress is telling us to buy something or scram. We’ll go hang at the square for an hour and wait until the show starts.”

She stood up and began weaving through the tables to reach the alley. Walter remained seated. He stared at his computer some more, then looked down at his flightsuit.

“Thiss *iss* my favorite outfit,” he muttered to himself.

12

Anlyn piloted the Bern ship through the Great Rift, sliding from one galaxy to another. As she scanned the backdrop of stars ahead of her, checking out the various structures floating in the void beyond, Edison began his prepared spiel in flawless Bern. She couldn't understand most of the individual words—her Bern in deplorable shape for a member of royalty—but she'd helped write the speech in Drenard, so she could somewhat keep up, translating in her head:

"Greetings, members of the great Bern race. We come unarmed and without malice. Please do not fire upon us. As ambassadors for the Drenard empire, we wish to communicate, nothing more. Please do not fire. We wish to speak in peace with your cultural representatives."

Edison lowered the mic and Anlyn checked the SADAR screen, or whatever the Bern called their version of it. Seeing nothing, she peered forward, squinting at the large structures floating silently in the distance.

"Another iteration?" Edison asked.

Anlyn shook her head. "I don't think anyone will hear you." She spread her hands toward the view through the canopy. "Where are the ships? All the *activity?"*

"The prophecy contained much accuracy," Edison said, chortling.

Anlyn didn't laugh. She settled back into her seat and grabbed the flight controls, spinning the ship in place. "We should tell Bishar. The Circle will want to—"

She fell silent. Looking back, a solid wall of gold stood in the open slit of space. The last hole in the barrier could be seen squeezing shut, one of the armored canisters brought forward and locked into place.

Anlyn reached for the radio. "Bishar, this is Anlyn, respond." She waited a moment for a reply. "Hello? Anyone, please answer."

Nothing.

Her hand dropped to her lap in frustration.

Edison took the radio from her grasp and returned it to the dash. "Reveal your ruminations," he said.

"You want to know what I think? I'm starting to wonder what we're doing here. Where are the Bern? I don't—we aren't supposed to be doing this by ourselves." Anlyn looked down at her lap. "Those two boys playing with your lance… what were their names—?"

"Who? You speak with adequate volume," Edison said, "but it appears self-directed."

"This was all a mistake. Everything. The speech, the prophecy, all

those people…" Anlyn glanced over at Edison, then looked away. "I'm sorry, I think I really messed up this time—"

Edison reached over and squeezed her arm; he growled in her native tongue: "Love, are we more lost than when we met?"

Anlyn thought about that.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head. "But back then, we had at *least* known what galaxy we were in."

"Ceti," said Edison, switching back to English.

"What?" Anlyn lifted her head.

"We currently occupy the galaxy designated Ceti by the Terran federation." He gestured to the screen ahead of him, then clacked a few buttons with his claws and the image zoomed in. "Observe. Our position is precisely determined." He flashed his teeth.

"Like I know where the Ceti galaxy is," Anlyn said, wiping at her face. She couldn't tell if her love was being sweet to change the subject, or just unaware. Either way, she tried to pull herself together.

"It is situated approximately two point eight five million light years from the Local Cluster," Edison said.

Anlyn glanced at his screen, then sat up straight and looked at her own. "How do I pull that up over here?"

Edison pointed to a button on his display. Anlyn pressed hers and tried to memorize the swirling shape of the word and the position of the key. The display of ranged targets disappeared from her screen, replaced with a standard looking chart. The names were gibberish, but she took the dotted trails for supply routes between good hyperspace jumps.

"How are you telling which galaxy we're in? Mine just shows nearby systems."

Edison clacked on his keys, and her screen duplicated his view. Their ship stood in the center, a blip nearly the size of what seemed to be an elliptical galaxy. Edison marked a target off to one edge, a fuzzy spiral in a cluster of several other blurry patches.

"The marker indicates home," he said.

"You're sure?"

He turned to her with a hurt look, then bared his teeth. "Positive." His claws tapped on the keys, and more targets lit up, his deep voice calling out names as they flashed. "The Milky Way. Andromeda. Triangulum. The more diminutive objects in periphery represent the dwarf galaxies within the cluster. The overall pattern is immediately recognizable. The only difference is the angle of reference, which is inclined forty two degrees from normal, and askew eighteen degrees clockwise."

Edison glanced over at her and seemed to catch the confused expression on her face. He looked back to the map and held his hands

out like he was clutching an invisible sphere. He swiveled both hands together and said in Drenard: “If you just rotate the map in your mind __”

“If *you* rotate it in your mind,” Anlyn said. “Some of us are normal.”

Edison’s teeth winked out in a sideways smile.

“Okay,” Anlyn said, wiggling to sit up straight, “So, the one we’re in, it’s called ‘Ceti?’” Anlyn tried to memorize the squiggle below their ship indicator; her brain didn’t feel quite up for the challenge. It was weird enough hearing Edison refer to galaxies with their Earth-names while speaking in Drenard. The last thing she needed was a third language thrown into the mix.

“That’s correct. And this one is labeled ‘Bern.’” He typed something, and a galaxy became highlighted in red.

“Oh, wait. I recognize that one. The shape anyway. Okay, I think I have my bearings. I’m just used to everything being centered on Drenard and right-side up.” Anlyn traced the black space around their ship’s indicator. “I wonder if the lack of lines between galaxies means we’re stuck in *this* one?” She shook her head. “No, of course not. There won’t be any resistance out here, no blockades and no keeps. It’s all Bern space, so there should be rifts with lots of traffic.”

“I’m confused,” Edison said. “The only way home should be through there.” He pointed at the shiny wall of plated armor ahead of them.

“It is.” Anlyn gripped the flight controls and spun the ship around to face the silent structures in the distance. “But we aren’t going home.”

She began accelerating out toward the large stations.

“We’re going to find the Bern and make first contact,” she said. “All over again. Prophecy or no prophecy, we’re here and we’re together, which makes this galaxy as good as any other.”

Edison reached over and rubbed her arm. “Agreed,” he said. “Besides, the most impossible thing we’ll ever do in all our lives has already been accomplished.”

“Which is?” Anlyn asked.

“Locating each other, of course.”

13

"Tickets! Get your free tickets!"

A man standing in front of the old opera house yelled the line over and over as he waved a fan of narrow stubs in the air.

"Ssee?" Walter hissed, turning to Molly.

Molly pulled him to a halt. "Did you know they were free when you stole them?"

Walter looked away.

"Thought so," she said, releasing him with a slight shove.

She approached the gentleman, noticing as she did so that most people were doing just the opposite: they were scurrying into the street to avoid him. She wondered if the repulsive effect came from his comical attire: the man had on red pants, a velvety red jacket, and a white shirt with ruffles so long and stiff, they looked like a dozen pale hands reaching up to strangle him.

"Why free?" she asked him. She held up her own ticket as he tried to shove a few in her hand.

"Oh! Very good. Coming to see tonight's show? Excellent. It's free because—" He turned to a passing group. "Free tickets!" he yelled, frowning as they declined. "It's always free on Tuesday nights. Tough day of the week— Free tickets!" More people scurried to the other side of the street. "Tough day of the week to get a crowd," he finished. "We make it up in fruit and alcohol sales. Free tickets! And of course, we haven't had this performer in several months. She's been making quite a circuit around Lok, refining her act. Free tickets! We need to get people hooked again, am I right?"

He smiled and nodded as if answering his own question. Or perhaps to let Molly know he was quite busy enough without having to talk to her. She turned and studied the façade of the old opera house, which loomed up beside her.

It didn't seem like much, not at first. Colorful dabs of paint clung to ornate carvings in desperate little chips. Rained-on dust dripped down massive columns in streaks, the tracks of brown smears blending with the dirt splattered upward from the sidewalk. The flaking and dripping made the entire building look like a half-burned candle of mud.

Through the grime and neglect, however, Molly saw something: an old grace, like a woman whose beauty had become shrouded in time. The building had tasteful architecture; it possessed a forgotten style that used to require an investment, back when artisans and laborers worked side-by-side, carving and painting masterpieces atop inspired engineering. But it was something *else* that made Molly's

breath catch in her chest. Something *familiar*. She actually remembered the place. Her father had brought her there when she was young—to see a magic act, she thought. A man had made loads of things disappear right off a stage before bringing them back again.

The old memory flooded her brain, striking for its clarity: a portly gentleman, bearded, wearing overalls instead of a magician's suit. Fidgety and nervous, his head had been sheening with perspiration, his voice cracking with discomfort, and yet he had been wildly popular with the crowd. She could hear them in her recollection of that day: roaring all around her as a prairie buggy vanished from stage, then going wild again as it returned with members of the audience sitting inside—the very people who had just disappeared from traps and what-not.

Molly closed her eyes and attempted to corral more details of that night. She placed herself inside the theater of her imagination and tried looking to the side to see her father. She felt like he was right there, turning to her and smiling—

She lost it. It was too dark, that place they'd been in. Or maybe it was her childhood that remained too dimly lit. Still, it felt as though she'd won a kind of lottery, had reclaimed some portion of her fuzzy past.

The Wadi put its cheek next to hers and flicked its tongue out as if it were trying to taste the memory as well. She opened her eyes and coaxed the creature down by her belly where she could cover it with her arm. Walter stood by her side, looking at her as if she'd lost her mind. Molly ignored him and strolled up to the entrance of the soiled building.

"Tickets?" a young boy by the door asked.

Molly fumbled for hers, exposing the Wadi, but the kid didn't seem to notice or care. "Why do you need them if it's free?" she asked, trying to make conversation.

The boy looked at her curiously, then glanced out at the gentleman in the street. "Good question," he said.

Walter pushed on her back, shoving her inside before brandishing his collection of tickets to the boy.

"You only need one," she heard the lad say.

Molly smiled and stepped deeper into the building, taking in the sight of the lobby, which was slathered in the same sort of red velvet worn by the ticket hawker.

"Thiss is nicse," Walter hissed.

Molly looked at the stains in the carpet, the torn posters on the walls, the crumbling ceiling tiles. Both the concession stand and ticket office were dark and empty. The former had a glass counter with several of the panes broken, fragments hanging like transparent teeth.

The latter looked like it had been broken into, the door askew and clinging to a single hinge. In the center of the lobby stood four grand columns, one of which had a wide crack running its length with rough-hewn lumber nailed across it, making it look like an arm in a splint.

Molly frowned and rubbed her own arm.

"Thiss iss like a date," Walter said.

Molly turned and saw him looking up at her, his hand reaching out to grab hers.

She pulled it away and used it to squeeze his shoulder. "This is *not* a date, Walter. We're here to meet someone." She glanced at the various doors leading to the seats. "Let's go sit up close so we can get her attention after the show." She headed for the stairs leading down, but Walter ran toward the door marked "Balcony."

"I wanna ssit up top!" he called over his shoulder.

Molly sighed and headed up after him. She didn't think it would be difficult to race down after the show and introduce herself to Cat, so she ascending the wide stairway darkened by burnt-out bulbs. Feeling her way up using the railing, Molly groped with her feet for that last, non-existent "ghost step" that always made her feel like a lepton.

Just as she started worrying about it, someone jumped at her, fingers digging into her ribs and nearly knocking her back down the steps.

"BOO!" Walter yelled.

Molly jumped so hard, she nearly pulled a muscle. She swung an open hand at him, but he was already rolling around on the red carpet, panting and wheezing in a full-on Palan giggle fit. Molly pictured herself kicking him in the shins, but somehow restrained herself. Then, the sight of something incredibly familiar loomed in her peripheral, distracting her.

She stepped over Walter and went to the rail, looking down across the seats and the handful of people milling about. She took in the stage, lit only by the house lights, and knew she'd been there before. And more recently than her early childhood. *Much* more recently.

Dakura. Her mother's simulated afterlife!

Her mom had whisked her there virtually in an attempt to keep her quiet. It had only been for a moment; her mother's next tactic had been to strap her into a dentist's chair, a memory Molly didn't feel like revisiting. She concentrated on the stage, instead. It was definitely the same place. And it had to be the same theater her father had brought her to as a kid, right before they fled to Earth. She must've been six, or very nearly. She looked up at the dimly lit dome above her head,

the tall walls to either side dotted with private viewing booths. She remembered sitting in one of those, leaning across the rails—

"Ew!" Walter yelled. Molly turned, and in the dim light she could see him patting his flightsuit, his hands coming away as if something were on them. "Thiss floor iss ssticky!" he hissed.

"Serves you right, you Drenard."

Walter scrambled to his feet. He looked down at the faint stains on his clothes. "I *am* a Drenard!" he said proudly.

Molly laughed, reminded once again that some of her habitual cursing no longer made any sense—or at the very least had become ineffectual. She led Walter along the rail to the seats at the center of the balcony, thinking about how she couldn't tell people to "go to hyperspace" the way she once had. Not since she was yearning to get there herself.

"Where iss everybody?" Walter asked, looking down at the sparse gathering below.

"I hate to break it to you buddy, but I don't think Cat's performance is gonna be that nebular."

She glanced at her watch, which was still on universal time. She did the math for Bekkie, taking into account its fourteen-hour days, and confirmed that it was almost eight. And yet, she and Walter were the only people on the balcony, and just a handful seemed to be gathering below.

Walter settled back and spread both of his arms across the generous armrests. Molly looked at all the empty seats around them and wondered why she felt obligated to sit directly next to him. The Wadi must've had a similar thought; it moved from her shoulder to the back of the adjacent seat and flicked its tongue out at a stain. Molly squirmed in her chair and wondered what those jerks on her ship were doing at that very moment.

After a few minutes of agonizing over *Parsona* and watching the Wadi explore its environment, a chorus of boos signified the start of the show. Molly leaned forward to glare down through the railing at the rude behavior. As the lights began to dim, she saw several people hurriedly purchasing fruits and vegetables from a vendor. A handful of spectators stood in the aisles, carrying on and making a ruckus.

The only other quietly seated people in the audience besides her and Walter were an older couple in one of the box balconies. Molly strained to get a view of them, but the house lights dimmed, and soon, the entire space was pitch-black.

An electric speaker popped, and then blared with a shriek of feedback. Finally, a voice—deep and loud—boomed through the mostly-empty building: "Ladies! Gentlemen! Lokians! Welcome to another Tuesday performance from Cripple Cat! We regret to inform

you, she has made a change in her routine during her recent tour of Lok. The management would like to stress the need to throw early and aim true."

The speakers clicked and popped again as a button was released somewhere. There was another shrill of feedback as it was pressed once more: "Enjoy the performance!"

As the announcer fell quiet, a new and worse sound took his place: a metallic crash followed by a terrifying wail of vibrating steel. It threw Molly's spine sideways, then the sound rang out again. And again. Each bang was like an off-key tuning fork sending out sonic tendrils to molest her ears. Through the noise, Molly could just barely hear the screams and boos calling out from below. The poor Wadi jumped from its perch, did a few circles in her lap, then started digging its way under her shirt.

Bang! Screeee! Over and over.

Molly stuck her fingers in her ears, but the horrid sound wormed its way through and just rattled around, trapped inside her skull. The assault on her one sense was so terrifying, it seemed to bleed over to others. She could taste metal. Pops of light burst in her stunned vision, although it was still pitch-black all around her. Even her nose hallucinated somehow, as an electrical burn tickled her nostrils.

The stage lights gradually brightened as the horrendous noise continued; they revealing a lone figure on the stage: a nude Callite, her back turned. At first, Molly couldn't tell what she was doing. Then she noticed several objects rising and falling in front of the woman. She glanced at Walter and could see his outline huddled and cringing from the awful noise.

They needed to get out of there before they went permanently deaf.

Just as Molly considered an escape from the barrage of awful sounds, the first volley of fruit arced from the crowd and into the puddle of light on stage. Molly watched, horrified, as the raw and rotten foodstuffs splattered across the alien's bare back. Something like cabbage exploded against her head, and the crowd could be heard whooping over the furious noise. The female Callite, seemingly naked, kept throwing the objects up in the air. Her back, brown and webbed with the lines of interlocking plates, shed the incoming missiles, her muscles rippling like turbulent, muddy water.

Molly pushed on her ears and watched intently. The Wadi finally managed to dig its way under her shirt; it crawled around to the small of her back where it huddled and shivered.

The woman began to turn. Another light came on, illuminating something floating down from above. Molly glanced up and saw a clear bubble descending—and the audience must have noted it as

well. The hail of rotten edibles became thick and frantic, most of them missing. The spectators began using both hands, as more objects zoomed through the air at once than there had been people below.

Some of the produce found their target, and as Cat spun around, Molly saw she wasn't completely nude. She wore a very short apron—almost like a welder's smock—that just covered her body from her breasts to the top of her thighs. She completed her turn, facing the audience and the hail of edibles, and Molly finally recognized the source of the clamor: two hammers, like small sledges, were being wielded in each hand. The woman swung them in tight circles, knocking the falling objects repeatedly into the air. The things she hit looked like woks, but with the handles removed. She struck them on their flat bottoms with such precision that they rose straight up, never spinning over. She just kept juggling them with noisy violence.

Molly matched each of the objects with their unique brand of auditory pain. All three had their own signature, like merciless handwritten scrawls etched with fingernails on a blackboard. A piece of fruit glanced off one of the woks, sending it wobbling. Molly heard excited whistling from the crowd as Cat fought to stabilize the blaring cone of steel. Meanwhile, the lip of the descending bubble was close to protecting her, so the aim from the unseen firing squad shifted to her bare legs, both of them already flecked with the salad of disgruntled viewers.

Molly felt hope swell in her chest for the tormented performer, glad that Cat had added the shell as some sort of feeble defense. The lip of the inverted bowl finally met the stage, locking inside a round collar and sealing it tight. Residual noise continued to ring in Molly's ears, but she could tell the source of the painful vibrations had gone away, as she could no longer feel the fabric of her shirt buzzing against her chest. She pulled her fingers out of her ears and worked her jaw, feeling something pop inside her skull.

The Wadi wiggled out of its makeshift cave and crawled up inside her shirt, peering out the collar. Molly leaned forward to take in the scene below as fruit from the audience continued to impact the barrier, sliding down and leaving colorful tracks behind.

Inside the bubble, Cat juggled the woks, each one rising up toward the ceiling of her shield before sinking back down. Without the agonizing noise, Molly could begin to appreciate the physical ordeal taking place. Each hammer looked to weigh a few kilos, and the woks had to be sturdy to take such a beating and put off so much sound.

Cat's arms, popping with sinewy muscles, were beautiful in motion. They vibrated with each impact, relaxed, then tensed, then vibrated again. The definition in them stood out through her dark,

scaly skin, the movement of them reminding Molly that Callites appeared to be made up of hard plates, but they were just as soft and pliable as she, the webbing no different than how her own skin looked on close inspection.

She shifted her gaze to Cat's legs, where the alien's larger muscle groups fought to keep her body stable, her torso rotating gracefully through the cycles of the juggling, hips and shoulders weaving in time to a tune Molly could no longer hear. The entire display was a sort of grace moving to the beat of torture, a sensuous expression of pain. Molly studied Cat's body and her motions intently, finally noticing the two bands encircling the woman's thighs, the only things she wore besides the smock-like apron.

Movement in the crowd broke Molly's concentration. She watched as the bored spectators threw the rest of their ammunition toward the dome. The missiles impacted and exploded as the unhappy silhouettes filed toward the exits.

For them, the night's entertainment was over.

For Molly, it had just begun.

A hum-filled silence ensued. There wasn't a peep outside Molly's head, just a dull, residual roar from the earlier explosions of sound. She watched, mesmerized, as Cat slammed the objects up into the air. It took her a moment, lost as she was in the lovely display of dexterity, to realize something truly awful. Something horrifying:

It wasn't quiet in that bubble.

The shield, Molly finally understood, wasn't meant to protect Cat from the hurled objects—it existed for the *audience's* benefit. It protected Molly and the rest of the spectators from the gods-awful noise.

Inside that shell—alone and unguarded—Cat endured a torment far worse and of greater frequency than the petty strikes hurled from the crowd.

Molly leaned over the railing, her empathy drawing her down inside that dome. She tried to imagine the horror of standing there, of enduring not just the noise, but the confined echoes of that shield. She felt the sickening inability to escape or win reprieve, the anguish of willingly secluding oneself in tight proximity to such violence.

The thought made her want to yell out for it to stop; she wanted to float to the stage and pound on the glass and put an end to it all; she wanted to throw something, *anything* at whoever was doing this. But the silence, the barrier between her and that agony, even the sheer beauty of Cat's precise movements, it all completely paralyzed her.

So she continued to watch, transfixed, at the sublime mastery of kinesthetics on display. And without even realizing it, she began to

cry. The tears silently streamed down her face as she clutched the railing with white knuckles and watched an event more meaningful and more beautiful and more terrible than her imagination could properly bear.

••••

Close by, the old Wadi responded to the tears and sadness. She kept her head tucked beneath the jutting outcrop of her pair-bond's chin, and she bobbed her head with grief, swaying with the somber scents she could see and smell like columns of smoke. Falling into a deep trance, she forgot even her great and persistent hunger. She forgot her need to feed her brood. She just lost herself in her pair-bond's emotions—clear and as moving as canyon music. And those emotions stirred something deep inside. Deep, where her pair-bond had triggered other changes by removing her from her lair. Changes she had once fled to the canyon of solitude to never feel again.

As the chemicals and smells of sadness swirled all around her, the Wadi remembered back to long ago. She remembered the arduous, dry, and hot run to the eggless canyon, that place where she could avoid what the male Wadis had done to her. She had made her home in those canyons where offspring were never produced and where the blue hunters rarely came. It had been so long ago, but she was willing to stay there even longer. She had planned on staying forever, hoping to avoid these changes for the rest of her days.

But now they were taking place, and emotions coursed down her scent tongue, traveling like liquid rays of the twin lights to fill her head and heart. They swelled and consumed her near to bursting—even as her body continued to dwindle. Continued to dwindle as whatever she ate and drank was robbed from her, pulled through some sucking void she couldn't understand, racing off to feed eggs laid in the eggless canyon, which was so impossibly far away that she could no longer taste it. Impossibly far away, but somehow connected to her, nutrients flowing through a corridor that shouldn't be there.

14

"What the *flank* are you doing?" yelled Cole. "What the *flank!"*

Joshua smiled and calmly returned the wooden sticks to their furry folds. He then brushed his hands along his thighs, smoothing the pelt covering them. "*More* questions?" he said. "Should I divide your friend into *smaller* pieces?"

Cole shook his head and panted for air. He watched the two goons bend down and grab Riggs's boots, pulling his calves forward so they could smear the cut edges with the purple goop. Blood leaked out the top of them. As they held them away from the rack, Cole could see the concentric circles of Riggs's insides, the white of bone surrounded by bright layers of red meat.

"Are you ready to answer my questions?"

Cole nodded.

"What's your name?" Joshua asked.

"Cole," he whispered. His mouth responded directly to the question, bypassing his brain, his heroics, his fear.

"Where are you from, Cole?"

"Earth. Portugal. What are you going to do with us?"

"If you ask me another question, I'm going to pull out my favorite toy again, do you understand?"

Cole looked away from Riggs, whose head had begun lolling from side to side, dull moans leaking out that seemed to come straight from Riggs's gut, not his vocal cords. The sound—primal and eerie—snapped Cole out of his zombie-like state. He nodded at Joshua.

"How do you know Mortimor?"

"I don't, I swear. I know his daughter."

Joshua nodded as if that made sense. "Have you been to Lok?"

"Never."

"Do you know what fusion fuel is?"

Cole dipped his head. "Yeah, of course. I went to the Academy, I __"

"No. Not what it's used for. What it *is*. What it's *made* of."

The question startled Cole. He thought of Dani back on Drenard, the conversation they'd had on that prison rooftop. Dani had told him that this was the *most important* question. He lowered his brows and shook his head.

"Were you about to say something?" Joshua asked.

"No, just… it's an odd question."

Joshua stepped close, frowning at Cole, his gaze boring straight through his skull. "I'm only going to ask the following once," he said, "so be honest with me. Are you a Drenard?"

Cole stopped breathing. He glanced at Riggs, who seemed awake, but in shock. His friend's head rolled around, the whites of his eyes showing.

"Yes," he said, not looking back at Joshua. "I'm a Drenard."

"Well, well!" Joshua slapped his thighs. "This is just unbelievable. Jons, finish putting that boy's legs back on. Kelly, untie Cole. You and I are taking the Chosen One to meet his maker."

Cole had no idea what any of that meant, but at least half of it sounded very bad for him. He kept his eyes on Riggs as one of the goons stood up, wiped his hands on his fur, and came over to untie him.

Joshua smiled at Cole and moved his goggles from his neck to his forehead. "If it makes you feel any better," he said, "we were always going to take the legs off both you lads. Had nothing to do with the questions."

Cole grimaced as the goon pulled him down from the rack. The brute loosened his hands and yanked his arms around his back before re-tying his wrists. Cole kept looking to Riggs, waiting for his eyes to focus, to see if he was going to survive. The guy at his feet had the ends of his legs forced together, the purple paste squeezing out between the severed edges. The man met Cole's stare for an instant before turning away; Cole closed his eyes right as the door squeaked open, blasting the room with harsh light. The last thing he saw before squeezing his eyes shut was one of Riggs's thighs twitching involuntarily, a trickle of blood oozing past the purple paste where the two parts of him were pressed together.

••••

They dragged him outside, the cold air and searing light washing over him. The light flashed through his eyelids, his thin flesh filtering the photons to the redness of glowing steel. Part of him wanted to open them a little—just to cauterize the image of the severed legs out of his memory. He instead forced himself to concentrate on other sensations, both to get a feel for his surroundings and to be distracted by something.

The first thing he noticed was a slight breeze swirling around his neck and flecks of freezing snow on his face. He could feel dollops melting in his hair, turning it wet. Forceful hands gripped his arms and shoulders on both sides, and hinges squeaked behind him as the door was pushed shut. Just before it clanged tight, Cole heard agonizing moans leak out from his friend, the sound bringing back the very images he was trying to avoid.

“Goggles!” Joshua barked.

Cole tried to shake the echo of the moans out of his head. He focused on the other sounds around him: the groaning of metal as if massive sheets of it twisted under pressure; the stomping of feet on steel decking, vibrations coming up his own shins; people shouting commands in the distance; the clatter of a sparse crowd. Behind it all—the sound of a soft yet persistent wind; the crunching of packed snow and crackling ice; a slight sway in the deck, like a boat at sea, or a ship with dying grav panels.

Hands went to Cole’s face. He tried to pull away, but his arms were still strapped behind his back, and somebody had him by the shoulders, fixing him in place.

“Keep still,” a voice said.

He felt something tight come down over his head—hair ripping out painfully—before the cups snapped over his eyes. Someone slapped him on the back of the head, either to tell him they were done or to punish him for being difficult, he didn’t know.

With the red glow gone from his vision, Cole tried cracking his eyelids. Blinking, he looking down at his feet and away from the dangerous light, but everything looked… normal.

They pulled him forward again, forcing him to take in his surroundings on the move. A clump of his hair had been trapped inside the goggles, obscuring his vision, but he could still see pretty well. Around him stood several small huts; they would’ve been normal looking if they weren’t made of metal plating. Cole recognized the colors on quite a few. Navy black and gray with words stenciled in blocky white letters:

DON’T STEP. CAUTION: HOT. CAPTAIN MICKLES.

Each phrase stood at odd angles or upside down, the hull they used to be a part of long disassembled and the shape of the crafts beaten flat with hammers. Cole saw a few ship names and designations that qualified as antiques, Navy hardware that hadn’t been used since the galactic expansion.

Their group weaved in and out of the square structures, through little alleys of zig-zag confusion. Cole looked down at his feet and wondered what they meant by putting Riggs’s legs back on and how he was going to “meet his maker.” His boots clomped on the steel decking dusted with the barest cover of snow. The rivets that dotted the deck and the thick welds that held the plates together gathered the white flakes in small ridges, like miniature drifts. Here and there,

these drifts were crushed flat by the boots ahead of him, pressed with the designs of mismatched soles.

They rounded another shed and popped out into a clearing—an expanse of flat steel. The area bustled with fur-clad people carrying things, coiling lines, someone welding amid a shower of golden embers. In the center of the square, a cluster of men clashed with sticks, as if training. Everyone looked exclusively human where the absence of fur revealed anything.

Cole looked down at his getup of flightsuit and jumper and wondered how they weren't burning up in all that fur. He was cold, but not freezing. His trio of escorts, Joshua, Kelly, and whoever had joined them outside the door, pulled him through the square and toward the far side. Getting away from the tightly packed buildings gave Cole his first vista of the overall area, allowing him to appreciate the size and scale of the massive ship. The deck stretched out thirty or so meters to either side and probably a few hundred or more to the far end. Through gaps in the buildings to his left, he could see a railing at the very edge and a white field of snow beyond. Out there, the flakes continued to move sideways in thick sheets, even though only a smattering of flakes fell over the village. It reminded Cole of the smaller craft he had been on. He assumed a barrier up front was parting the heavy snow, and that the sounds and vibrations in the steel meant the entire metal village was underway, sailing across the snow-covered land on large runners.

They were halfway across the square before Cole finally noticed the fleet overhead. Ships, dozens of them, possibly hundreds. Large and black, they looked menacing beyond the veil of snow, fierce in the way only half-hidden things could be. It was impossible to count them, which added to their awful potential, but there were enough to blot out the sky. Anywhere he could see through the flurry, dark hulls loomed, their overlapping forms creating an artificial cosmos to replace the harsh whiteness he'd seen from the Firehawk's belly. Across that black, the snowfall whizzed horizontal like speeding stars in some holovid's corny rendering of what traveling through hyperspace might be like.

Joshua spoke with the other two escorts as they dragged him along, but Cole couldn't concentrate on what they were saying. Besides the fleet, there was another distraction: a massive tower—a larger version of the mast-like pole from the smaller vessel—that rose above a cluster of steel buildings ahead. Cole tried to follow it up to the top, but the spire rose further than he could see without arching his back. His group seemed to be heading straight for the strange object.

Beyond the tower, he could just barely make out the tall walls of

dull steel that seemed to form the prow of the monstrous craft. The high barrier, shaped like a "V," must be what broke the driving snow to either side. The sheets of steel had to be three stories high, at least. Between them and the mast there was another large clearing on which sat a few ships. Cole could see their tails sticking up over the squat buildings, the light snow swirling around them. One of the tails he recognized as a Firehawk, the rest were alien. Not just indistinguishable: *alien*.

"You sure about him, boss? This is the guy from the prophecy?"

A fragment of the conversation grabbed Cole's attention, and something told him they'd been speaking of him for a while. They passed through an alley on the far side of the clearing, exiting at the base of the tall mast. Cole tried to focus on what was being said, but yet another curiosity caught his attention: another group of men were practicing with wooden sticks ahead of the mast, but they were doing it in slow motion.

Then Cole saw that *everyone* up ahead was moving slowly, all across the wide deck as far as he could see. A figure descended from one of the ships, taking forever to move between rungs. A woman walked across the deck in half-speed. She had fur up to her neck, black goggles over her eyes, and her long ponytail swayed side to side like a pendulum through viscous water. A man with a blowtorch cut away at one of the ships, but the shower of sparks flew up as slow as lazy bugs, arcing out forever and drifting down as if frightened of actually landing. Cole looked at his own feet; they appeared to be moving at a normal speed.

He started to ask Joshua about the effect, then saw they had almost reached the base of the large tower. About ten meters wide and perfectly round, it appeared to have a flat top—like a squat cylinder sitting on one end. The tower rose up from the center of this platform: thin and wide like a blade, but with dozens of slits running its length.

As his escorts led him past the structure, Cole thought he sensed it twist a little, the entire cylinder rotating slightly. The people in the distance moved even slower now, nearly at a stand-still. Some sort of game they were playing on him?

One of his feet hit the back of his ankles, and he nearly tripped forward, but the arms at either side caught him. Another hand smacked the back of his head, the blow echoing with laughter.

"Enough," he heard Joshua say.

Cole tried to look over at Joshua, and then he noticed the world had returned to normal: everyone had picked up their pace across the moving village. To his side, the tower definitely moved a little, twitching and rotating. They led him around the perimeter of the base to the forward side of it.

Meet his maker? The phrase rang in Cole's ears again. Was he about to be strung up? Executed? Simple as that? And why cut off Riggs's legs to put them back on? How was that even *possible?* And why put them back *on* if they were to be executed? What in hyperspace was going on?

Cole felt his pulse quicken as he ran through the questions and the likely answers. He still felt shaken up from the crash landing, from the strange voices in his head, from the fight with Riggs. There was too much going on and none of it made sense. He needed one thing he could understand, something to somehow web the rest of it together.

But he had nothing. His entire environment felt out of focus as they pulled him in front of the tower's base. He saw a steep flight of stairs there, cut into the flat cylinder and leading all the way up and aft toward the top of the platform. They started pulling Cole up the stairs while some inner self yelled: *fight back*. But as soon as he put his feet out to resist, they just lifted him up and carried him. Now and then, the entire tower would twitch to one side, and the men would sway together, grabbing handrails and dragging Cole roughly.

Definitely an execution. A flogging at the mast. The more Cole struggled, the more hands he felt on him, some coming swiftly and in the shape of fists.

Suddenly, the world started flashing by around him. He must've been going into shock. Everything moved at a blistering pace, the snow a blur to either side, people whizzing across the deck below. He squirmed and kicked and felt himself picked up by all four limbs, laughter filling his ears.

After the last step, they threw Cole down and wrenched his arms up; somebody forced his knees under him and he tried to kick out—he shook his shoulders back and forth. When someone punched him in the liver, Cole bent to the side in agony. He thought of Molly—tried to focus on his love for her—pulling her face out of memory to have something solid to cling to.

Rough hands grabbed his head and forced his gaze up, while his arms were yanked against the restraints. He was having the hardest time remembering what Molly looked like. It heaped sadness on his despair. He could feel tears welling up in his eyes, threatening to drown him inside his goggles.

A face swam into view. Not Molly's, not the face he was trying to conjur, but one familiar. It loomed down in front of him, smiling.

Cole couldn't make sense of it. He recognized the man, the thin face, the wicked smile. Cole blinked, trying to focus through his goggles, feeling like this was exactly how he'd seen him before: through a sheet of thick plastic. Or carboglass.

Dakura.

The man from Dakura who was after Molly! Cole couldn't remember his name, wasn't sure if he ever knew it, but he knew that face—

Byrne. He *did* know it. He remembered Molly saying it in horror. But didn't they leave him for dead in that loading bay?

Joshua stepped forward and began whispering in Byrne's ear. He waved his hands as he spoke.

Byrne's smile grew. He stared at Cole, nodding his head.

Cole tried to focus on what was being said, then noticed the strange man was wearing a red band around his forehead. He wondered if it was his; he wondered if the man remembered him from Dakura.

Byrne whispered something in return to Joshua, who stepped back and relayed it to the people holding Cole. As Joshua stepped aside, Cole realized there was something different about the thin man, something besides the red band. Byrne wore the same outfit of thin canvas pants, a shirt with large white buttons, his wiry frame poking out at the shoulders—

But Cole could've sworn the last time he'd seen him, Byrne had been in possession of both his arms.

15

Cat eventually seemed to tire and make a mistake, and one of the woks fell and rattled silently inside the bubble. Molly tried to sense how long the beautiful and brutal display had been going on. Half an hour? Longer? Cat pulled her foot out of the way of the spinning wok as her arms continued looping in large circles. The strained grimace on her face was visible even from the balcony. She looked away from the remaining two mid-air objects and nodded to someone off-stage. As her head turned, Molly spotted a bright trickle of blue blood leaking out of the Callite's ear and weaving its way down her brown neck.

A moment later, the lights began to dim, and Cat juggled the last two woks lower and lower, allowing them to settle to the ground. Finally, the torturous and sublime show came to a silent conclusion, but Molly remained transfixed, staring into the darkness as her mind struggled to comprehend the powerful display she had just witnessed: a solitary figure, on stage, enduring incredible violence while exhibiting such practiced expertise. She had to meet this person. She wanted to get backstage somehow and thank her. Congratulate her.

Then she remembered: *that's why we're here!*

She turned to grab Walter and saw that he had passed out across the armrest on the other side of himself.

"Walter, are you asleep?"

He lifted his head as the dim house lights flickered and returned. Molly looked to the stage and saw that Cat was gone, the bubble rising slowly toward the rafters.

"Iss it over?"

"Yeah, let's go."

Molly shooed the Wadi to her neck and hurried toward the stairs. Behind her, she heard someone clapping; she glanced over her shoulder to see the couple in the box seats giving the performance a standing ovation.

"Let's go," she repeated impatiently. She turned down the stairwell and took them two at a time, not waiting for Walter to catch up.

The lobby was empty save for one man—the ticket hawker from the street—who leaned on a mop. Molly ran toward the doors that led down to the lower seats, then whirled to ask him: "How do I get backstage?"

The man threw both arms wide, dangling the dripping mop in the air.

"Practice!" he announced, smiling like a fool.

Walter staggered down the last few steps, still half-asleep.

"I'm serious," Molly said. "I need to speak with Cat."

"Well, you better hurry if you want an autograph." The man laughed to himself. "She'll be in no shape to write before long."

"What? Where is she? It's important."

The man pointed slantwise through the building. "She's most likely in the back alley with her meager pay, heading off to a pub to get tore up."

"Thanks!" Molly said. She grabbed Walter and pulled him toward the exit.

"No problem," the man said. He then hollered after them: "But next time, there's a two tomato minimum!"

••••

Molly kept one hand on the Wadi's back as she ran down the side of the opera house, not so much to keep the creature in place but to let it know the claws weren't necessary, at least not deep enough to sting.

At the back of the building, she turned the direction she thought the ticket hawker had pointed and peered down an alley that serviced the rears of two rows of businesses. In the dim light of a few bare bulbs, she could see dumpsters dominating the lane, their quiet bulk contributing to the smell of things dead and rotting. Detritus was strewn everywhere, and bits of paper floated in the dark and dusty night air; they caught the feeble light and seemed like things alive and fluttering intently.

Molly hesitated, wishing a Palan flood upon the place. That miserable weather phenomenon would be a blessing for the alley. Squinting into the distance, she thought she saw someone turn a corner half a block away, but she couldn't be sure.

"Drenards!" she cursed.

Walter skidded to a stop beside her. "Sslow down—" he complained.

"Hold her," Molly said, handing him the Wadi so her claws wouldn't be a concern. After he took the animal, Molly set off in a full sprint toward the corner she thought someone had moved around, berating herself as she ran for not bringing a flashlight. Pumping her legs, she weaved around the dumpsters, her boots growing heavy as the treads collected mud made of dust and discarded cooking grease.

Around the corner, she came to a halt. Another alley—long, narrow, and empty—stretched out before her like an urban canyon. The high buildings on either side blocked out all the streetlights; they

rose up so far they seemed to be leaning in on one another.

Molly called down the passage: “Cat? Hello? Anyone?”

She stepped into the narrow crack between the two buildings and peered toward the shaft of light at the far end. The light seemed to come from the streetlamps of a busy road; they pulsed as shapes moved across them, headlights blooming and receding behind the silhouettes of a conveyor-like crowd.

The din of nighttime activity seemed the logical place to find a pub, but the dark alley made it seem so very far away. Despite her sense of urgency to catch up with Cat, Molly moved through the alley slowly. She could feel raw, childlike fear creep up her spine. She silently urged Walter to hurry and catch up.

As she crept deeper into the darkness, she felt internally torn. The impatient part of her urged her to hurry after the woman she’d spent two weeks searching for, but the fearful part of her begged to run back, to get out of that dark alley. She pleaded with Walter to come faster, for some physical company to wave away the creepiness. She was a dozen meters into the dark space when she finally heard him pad up behind her in his near-silent way. She turned and groped in the darkness for Walter, whispering his name…

But all she seized hold of was the bad thing reaching out to grab *her*.

16

Byrne nodded to the two goons holding Cole in place, and the men lifted him to his feet. They shoved him forward and presented him like a trophy. Cole and Byrne faced each other, one man with his arms strapped behind his back, the other lacking them altogether.

It made for an awkward moment.

Cole glared at the red band around Byrne's forehead and cursed his stupidity. Joshua approached and whispered once more into Byrne's ear; he jerked his head in Cole's direction as he spoke. Cole tried to read his lips, but found himself again distracted by the dizzying speed with which the world flew past to either side. He glanced to the deck far below where the fur-clad people moved so fast, they left trails behind like human blurs. And the snow flying by to either side, drifting lazily a moment ago, now stretched out in a sheet of fuzzy white. Cole felt another wave of vertigo, and the men behind him had to support his weight as his knees buckled.

"Bring that chair closer," Byrne said, nodding to one of the several pieces of furniture scattered around the mast.

As the goons went to work, Cole fought to regain his balance. He turned back to the scene around him, dizzy and confused. The circular platform was everywhere cluttered with tables and chairs and sprinkled with the debris that came from lounging men: empty cups, trays filled with ash and butts, plastic bags smeared with a film of purple. The normal seemed juxtaposed with the bizarre, as if regular people lived in this, the most irregular of places. For a moment, Cole wondered if he'd died in the Firehawk crash. Maybe the dreamlike inconsistency of the place was nothing more than the mad firings of his dying brain. Riggs's legs; the snow; the slow and fast people; someone that should be dead, now alive, but missing his arms… all of it layered on a backdrop of people he knew from history books. People that shouldn't be alive.

He watched, detached, as a chair constructed of metal strips was placed beside a seat ornate enough to qualify as a throne. Byrne sat in the latter, and Cole vaguely felt someone tugging at his arms, working the restraints loose. His hands came free. Cole rubbed the red mark around one of his wrists and went to adjust his goggles and get the clump of hair out of his eyes. Before he could, he found himself being pushed forward and forced down into the chair.

"Leave us," Byrne said to the others.

Joshua flushed. "Sir, I—" he stammered.

"Have your men remain on deck, outside of the mast's time-flow. Put them in shifts if need be. You may cut him down if he runs."

Byrne studied Cole. “But I don’t think he will. The prophecy has failed, and now there’s nothing left but time.”

“Any word from—?” Joshua tapped his forehead, his eyes darting over to Cole.

“Our friend will come through, don’t worry. And anyway, the invasion has already begun. It will succeed no matter what. Now go prepare your men. Don’t come back unless four days pass below. I’ll be returning to the command ship at that time.”

Joshua’s faced twitched at the news, his leathery complexion not quite weathered enough to hide his disappointment. Still, he bowed low to Byrne and forced a wan smile. “Very well,” he said. He stood upright, his eyes flickering over to Cole, then up to the men holding him in place.

Their hands came off his shoulders, and Cole finally had a chance to adjust his goggles. He closed his eyes, reseated the dark lenses, and brushed the wet clumps of hair off his forehead. Joshua and his men were halfway down the steps by the time he opened them again, their limbs twitching as they picked up speed. He turned to the armless man to his side.

“What in the *galaxy* is going on?” Cole asked. “What *is* this place? And my friend, is he—?”

“Do you know who I am?” the man interrupted.

“You were on Dakura,” Cole said. “You—you were kidnapping Molly. Byrne, right? What were you planning on doing with—?”

“With Mollie?” Byrne smiled. “I thought she was *you*.”

“What?”

Byrne settled back in his ornate chair and closed his eyes, smiling.

“Are you talking to someone right now? Is that my band?”

Byrne opened his eyes. “*Was* your band. And I think it was ordained that you bring it to me. I’ll have you know that I’m truly savoring this.”

Cole watched the men shuffle around at the base of the tall pedestal, out of earshot. Joshua’s blonde hair was no longer among them. The group moved to and fro somewhat faster than normal—twitching and jerking—but nothing like the distant crew, who continued to race around impossibly fast.

Cole turned to Byrne. “None of this is real, is it? I’m dreaming, right?”

“Oh, no,” Byrne said. “*You* are not dreaming. *I am*.”

Cole rubbed his hands through his hair and acted like he was drying them on his flightsuit. He felt his pockets for the utility knife or the band, but found nothing. He rubbed the edges of Mortimor’s name patch, the detail and consistency of some things causing him to doubt he was dead, dying, or dreaming.

“So, what, we’re just gonna sit here? You’re not gonna tell me where I am or how my friend’s doing?”

“Petty concerns, Chosen One.” Byrne laughed, shaking his head. “I dreamed of this day in a million different ways, but never like this. Sitting with you, in hyperspace, the invasion underway, this will be an enjoyable report to write.” He glanced down at his own shoulder, the sleeve of his thin, white shirt tied in a knot where his arm should be.

“Enjoyable to *dictate*, perhaps,” he said.

Cole leaned back and rubbed his face. “You’re talking in riddles, man. *What* invasion?”

Byrne turned to him. “Just how *little* do you know?”

“Less than zero. Seriously. I feel like I just woke up in someone else’s body. Why is everything moving so fast out there? And what’s this prophecy and chosen one nonsense? Who *are* you? Is my friend going to be okay?”

Byrne pursed his lips, his thin mouth set at an angle. Cole imagined a nonexistent hand reaching up to scratch his chin, completing the pose.

“How were you supposed to stop something you never understood?” Byrne wondered aloud.

“By accident?” Cole offered.

Byrne smiled. “I suppose. Strange that Mollie came so close to stopping the invasion. I should’ve known she was no Drenard.”

Cole swallowed. Loudly. “What does being a Drenard have to do with anything? Or are you just trying to frustrate me before you kill me?”

Byrne shook his head. “That’s the problem with you Humans, always thinking we want you dead for the pure thrill of it.” He paused, his thin eyebrows coming down. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Humans?” Cole studied the man’s face closely, looking for some major difference. “What are *you?”*

“We’re known in this area as the Bern, but we go by many names. We are everywhere. This is *our* universe, and it has been for many passings. You… you are one of us. Well, *almost*.” Byrne gazed up at the black shapes barely visible through the whizzing streaks of snow.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. How much time does my friend have—?”

“Time.” Byrne laughed, his voice oddly full and thick for so thin a frame. “Time does strange things here, that’s for sure. Take the mast behind us. When time meets it, each quanta of moment—the very constituent particles that move events along—they split in two and then split again. All those particles pass through the slits, propelling this magnificent collection of metal and men forward. Ingenious.

Almost Bern-like to have been crafted by Humans. And for one such as myself, who the eons have made impatient, that makes this such a wonderful spot to rest. To usher events along." He looked over at Cole. "If you wanted to live forever, you would just need to spend a few hours a day up here, letting time split around you, undoing the decay. Or, if you wanted to meet your end faster, in mere moments even, try your luck on the *other* side." Byrne smiled.

"I don't understand," Cole said.

"Why don't I tell you a story?"

"Is it more riddles? Are you going to kill me afterward?"

"It's a simple story. And, no."

"Good. To both." Cole leaned back in his chair. He made a show of crossing his arms, defiant and mocking at once. "I hope it's not a long one, then."

Bern laughed in his deep, throaty way.

"In many ways, it's the *longest* story," he said. "But don't worry. We have *plenty* of time."

17

Molly groped in the darkness for Walter, but the hands that groped back weren't his. They were too strong to be his. They wrapped around her, and she screamed at the top of her lungs, cut off when a hand clamped down on her mouth. She felt herself lifted off the ground, her back pressing up against someone's broad chest.

She kicked back at her captor's shins and tried to shake her head free, but it felt like being back in Byrne's arms, like struggling inside a vise. The dim alley turned to complete darkness as she was pulled through a doorway and into one of the buildings framing the alley. A thick door slammed shut and another opened, filling the small foyer with light. She found herself dragged backward and into a larger room, trembling and confused.

"Whatcha got?" someone asked.

"Don't know yet," a voice said close to her ear. "She's a feisty one, though."

The man holding her turned around, giving her a sweeping view of the room. It looked like a small warehouse that had been transformed into a triage unit. High tables were arranged in a grid with people on at least half of them. Cords and tubes ran out of the figures, and tables of medical utensils sat to their sides. Molly tried to reach up for the hand over her mouth as another man approached. He was short and bald but with a dark beard that ran from ear to ear. He wore a white blood-splattered apron over a traditional business suit.

"Oh, very pink," the man said, looking Molly up and down. He grabbed one of her wrists and twisted her hand around violently. Molly tried to pull away, but the guys were too strong. The man with the beard bent back one of her fingers to inspect her swollen pads; he wrenched the digit nearly to the point of breaking, the sudden jolt of pain taking her breath like ice water.

"You a local?" he asked Molly.

She grimaced and shook her head as much as the other man's grip would allow. She could feel her eyes widening, tears of terror pooling up. She had to force herself to blink, her eyelids swiping the blurriness out of her vision.

"Yeah, you don't look like a local. Shame." The short man looked up at the figure behind her, and then pointed to one of the tables. "Number fifteen," he said. "Find out where she's from and get started. Oh, and don't nab any more. I told the wife we wouldn't be pulling a late shift tonight."

"Yeah, boss," the man holding her said. He carried her toward one of the tables. Molly twisted her hips, trying her best to squirm

away, but the guy had one of his massive arms wrapped around her elbows, pinning them to her side. Even though she'd once taken out a male Drenard warrior with her bare hands, she felt absolutely powerless against such strength and in that position.

Another large guy looked up from a distant table. "You need help with that one?" he asked.

"And split the commission? Flank you, Randie, I've got this one."

The other guy laughed and went back to tightening leather restraints across another person, who moved and grunted through a gag of some sort. Molly's heart raced in panic—she couldn't get enough oxygen through her nose.

Her captor released her mouth and reached down to grab one of her knees. He squeezed it painfully. Molly screamed as loud as she could as he picked her up and lifted her to the cold, metal surface. She continued screaming as he held her down with one hand. There was a busy street nearby; she just needed someone to hear her.

"Shut up!" the man said through clenched teeth. He struggled to hold her down as she squirmed and continued yelling. As he leaned over to grab a set of restraints, she got her first look at the brute. Human, with a head as big as a bull's. He chewed on his lower lip as he tried to work one of the straps together with a single hand.

Molly yanked one of her arms free and swung at his blocky, stubbled face. The man blocked the blow, and she got a slap across her own cheek for the effort, hard enough to see spots of light. While she was stunned, her cheek on fire, the brute corralled both of her hands together and held her wrists in one of his fists. He pinned them against her stomach while he leaned across her legs with his torso.

Molly resumed screaming bloody murder, as high-pitched and piercing as she could. She twisted her torso back and forth, trying to break his grasp.

"Okay! A little help!" the man yelled.

The other guy lumbered over and held her legs with both hands while the first guy got a strap across her arms.

"You got this one, huh?" the second man asked, laughing.

"Let me go!" Molly yelled. She screamed at the top of her lungs.

The first guy reached to the small table nearby and grabbed a rag, covered in blood. He forced it into Molly's mouth. She gagged immediately, her head convulsing, her throat seized by spasms as it tried to eject the foul thing. She couldn't help but taste the coppery bitterness, feel the wetness of someone else's blood on her tongue. One corner of the rag fell back on her gag reflex, triggering it over and over.

Coughing into her own mouth caused a corner to flap loose. It wiggled against the deep reaches of her tongue, partway down her

throat. As she gagged and sucked air through her nose, she began to panic with the possibility of breathing the thing in deeper, sucking it down where the choking would become total.

Molly quickly found herself as close to death as she had ever been. She couldn't get enough air into her lungs. She forgot about the men and the restraints and the other bodies, and just concentrated on the obstruction in her mouth. She forced her tongue over—it wouldn't obey—she finally got an edge, curled her tongue around it—that nasty taste—and pushed the rag forward just a little bit.

Again. Concentrating, working her tongue, forgetting the slick and wet, ignoring the rank on her tastebuds, wrapping her tongue around the back side, collecting the drooping piece that threatened to kill her, the raw taste of it making her gag over and over—

There.

She had the offending piece corralled, but the abhorrent taste made her feel like vomiting; her mouth was full of foul saliva, too much to swallow. She very nearly worked the entire rag out of her mouth, almost had it past her teeth—her entire being had become mouth and tongue and cheek, working them all with the force of several limbs—

A strip of adhesive went across the rag, holding it in place. Molly flexed her arms and legs and found she'd been locked down tight, several straps cinched across her body. She strained, arching her back, grunting and moaning with frustration, but she couldn't move. And somehow, having been in that exact position before, the depressing familiarity of it all—it made the terror and panic and unfairness even worse.

"Thanks," one of the guys said, punching the other one playfully. Molly lifted her head and watched the two men as the panicked fog from the rag ordeal melted away. She tried to give them her widest, most beseeching eyes, but they weren't paying her any attention. The second guy, who also wore a smattered apron but over a jumpsuit, lumbered back to his work. The man from the alley stood by her side. He crisscrossed the sash of his own apron around his back before knotting it right in the middle of an old, dull stain.

"You've been a busy voter," the man said, looking down at her scabbed and raw hands. He pulled something from the table. Molly tried to get a glimpse of it before he slid it over her finger. She couldn't see it, but she knew what it was as soon as the padded clamps gripped her knuckles.

Molly moaned into the blood-soaked rag, anticipating the pain before the needle hit. It felt like a rod the size of a coin shooting through the raw pad of her index finger. She felt herself grow dizzy, then gag again, nearly vomiting in the back of her throat. She started

coughing, the useless reflex muffled and hollow. The bloody rag fluttered inside her cheeks, touching her tongue and the roof of her mouth, dabbing them with metallic nastiness.

"Okay, now, let's see where you're from," the man said, studying a small screen as if routinely taking her temperature.

••••

Walter pressed his ear to the door and looked down the length of the dark alley. He'd heard a scream as he rounded the corner, but couldn't tell where it had come from. The Wadi stood on his shoulder, scratching at the metal door with its claws.

Walter stood back and pounded on the door again, but the slab of metal sounded like it was a foot thick; his fist hardly made a noise. He turned to the other side of the alley and scrambled for the Wadi as it tried to jump off his shoulder.

"Sstay put," he told it. He shoved it into one of the hidden pockets he'd sewn into his flightsuit—the one right across his belly big enough to steal most anything worth having.

The other door, the one on the opposite side of the alley, made a normal sound as he pounded it with his small fist. Surely Molly would've had the good sense to go through *this* one. He continued knocking until the door cracked, letting out a wedge of light framing someone's head.

"The flank you want?" the person asked.

"Hi. I'm Walter. I'm looking for—"

"Entrance is in the front, you freak!"

The door slammed shut, startling Walter.

He frowned and looked down the dark alley, toward the glow of civilization at the far end where fast, moving things zipped past. There were only two doors, and he had knocked on them both. He pressed a hand against his stomach to stop the Wadi from squirming and set off toward the bluster of happening things. If the entrance was in the front, he'd have to look for Molly there.

18

"This is the story of *our* universe," Byrne said.

"*Your* universe?" It was the second time Byrne had referred to it like that.

Byrne nodded. He glanced over at Cole, then out at the white lines created by the hyper-fast snow as it streaked across the dark ships beyond. "Not by conquest or fiat, mind you. I'm not being lordly, just stating a fact. It's ours because we made it."

"You mean *hyperspace?* Is that what you made?"

Byrne laughed. "No," he said. "I *wish* we had, but this is the first time around we've even discovered it." He gazed toward the bow of the large, moving village. "Everything will be so much easier from now on," he said quietly. He shook his head and looked at Cole, who could feel the muscles in his forehead ache from keeping them furrowed in constant confusion.

"No, when I say we made the universe, I mean the one you are familiar with. We made the last several thousand of them—"

Byrne paused and frowned at the blank stare Cole must've been giving him. "I apologize," he said. "I forget how limited your cosmological theories are. When I look at you, at any of you Humans, it's like looking at a mirror. So few differences…" Byrne crossed his legs and seemed to settle back in his strange, metal throne. "Why don't I start by explaining how the universe works, how it moves and operates. Let's imagine for a moment that we're on your home planet —"

"Gladly," Cole interrupted.

Byrne smiled. "If you don't get this lesson, my friend, the rest of the story will be lost. Now, imagine yourself on Earth, anywhere you like. Pretend you can walk across water and over any mountain. If you were to set off in a straight line in any direction, where would you end up?"

"On the other side," Cole answered quickly, hoping to move the story along. "No—" With his index finger extended, he drew a circle in the air in front of him and focused on it through his goggles. "You'd end up where you started. Right?"

"Only if you *stopped* there." Byrne had taken the tone of a teacher guiding along a favored student. He smiled at Cole, and for the first time, Cole realized Byrne didn't have on goggles and didn't seem to need them.

"You could keep going forever, if you liked," Byrne said. "And that's how the universe is shaped, only one dimension higher—"

"Well, you're wrong about our cosmology, then. We've known

this for a long time. If you travel in a straight line anywhere in the universe, you'll end up where you started. It curves around on itself."

"Oh, you've got the shape right," Byrne agreed. "You've had that nailed for hundreds of years. However, your cosmologists don't seem to appreciate the consequences, even though it's completely obvious."

"Consequences?" Cole asked.

"Everything in the universe is *indeed* traveling in a straight line. Which means—" He frowned, pursing his thin lips as if formulating a dumbed-down version for a child. "Imagine we're sitting on the North Pole of your planet."

Cole looked up at the snow flurries, at the large spire behind him. His imagination hardly needed to exert itself. "Done," he said.

"Now picture the matter of the universe spreading out from here, all of it heading in every direction possible around your planet. Where is it going?"

"Back to where it started, just like when I go walking in a straight line."

"Except you were traveling *alone*," Byrne pointed out. Cole could almost imagine the armless man wagging his finger like Professor Phister used to. "Don't forget," Byrne said, "that there's a lot of stuff in this example. If it's all moving roughly the same speed—"

"The South Pole!" As soon as Cole uttered the answer, a lot more fell into place; he could almost hear his brain click audibly. The leading theory of their day, hundreds of years old and mostly unchanged, remained the Big Bang theory. Even with the problems of inflationary theory and dark energy, it was still the best they had, as messy and patchwork as it had become.

Cole thought about all that matter spreading out across the surface of a sphere, all heading away from the North Pole. He could see it traveling through the dips and rises, thinning out as it moved away. And then he could see it starting to *come back together*. All of it —all of *everything*—meeting in a big crunch at the South Pole. He considered the expanding universe and pictured for the very first time *where* it was expanding *to!*

"That's why the expansion is speeding up," Cole murmured. It was one of the mysteries of cosmology, the odd fact that expansion was accelerating when gravity should be slowing it down. Now he knew why. He turned to Byrne. "We're halfway there, aren't we? The matter is no longer flying away from itself, it's now coming closer together! Gravity is working the *other* way, speeding it along."

Byrne nodded. "Precisely how we like to put it. We are 'past the universal equator.' *Well* past, in fact."

Cole forgot where he was, all the trouble he'd seen, all the matters relatively inconsequential. His brain went giddy with the

possibilities, scrambling to assemble them into a coherent whole.

"That also explains hyperinflation," he said. "It explains why things are going so quick in the beginning. All that matter just finished its downward swoop, so it would be absolutely flying as it came together!" He paused, finding a problem with the theory. "But why don't we see it coming if we're getting closer?" he asked. "Where's all the other stuff?"

"All that *stuff* is over the horizon, to extend the metaphor."

Cole pictured that. "But not because the light fails to bend, right? Is it because of the speed everything's traveling?" Cole held up his finger, seeing it clearly. "It's because of the *direction* it's traveling through this fourth dimension."

Byrne smiled broadly at Cole. "You *are* the one, aren't you? I can see it, now. I never could in Mollie."

Hearing her name elicited a shiver from Cole, snapping the descent into philosophy and cosmology. He remembered where he was, felt it like an icicle stabbing through his chest. He pictured Molly strapped to the gurney in Byrne's ship, and the vision angered him, breaking the physics lesson. It helped him see another flaw in Byrne's theory.

"That can't be right," he said. "The Big Bang didn't happen in a *place*, it happened everywhere. It *created* space. Hell, the Big Bang happened just as much in my Portugal as it did in the Andromeda galaxy!"

Byrne laughed at this, bending at the waist and uncrossing his legs. It was a jolly laugh, very Human-like. When he settled down, he turned to Cole: "Son, we aren't talking about hypotheticals, here. I'm not discussing *theory*. This is what we know, what we've known for a very long time. We've *observed* it."

"That's impossible," Cole spat. "How can you observe something that destroys everything?"

"Oh, but it doesn't. Very nearly but not quite. Not everything arrives at the same time, and some of it gets deflected. Besides, the South Pole of the universe, if you like to consider it that, is a very big place. As hot as it gets—and it gets hot enough to melt down nature's laws—there are ways to get information through. Just as a particle can escape a black hole now and then, we can make sure data survives the Great Passing."

Cole's jaw dropped. "You've *done* this? This isn't the first time we've been here?"

"Literally? You and I?" Byrne looked at the world zipping around them. "Of course it is." He laughed. "There's nothing mystical here, none of that repeating-our-actions nonsense. No, no, in fact, each universe is vastly different. That's our *job*. That's why I say this is *our*

universe."

Cole shook his head. "I don't understand."

"What is life but information, my young friend? We are just—well *you* are just chemical programs and mindless routines. Ahh, you frown, and you are right to do so. Sentient things cannot grasp the accidental nature of their existence, and they are correct to feel this way. Tell me, do you know why Humans and the Bern look so similar?"

Cole looked at his hands and considered the question. "Convergent evolution?" he guessed. "The simplest solutions predominate?" But he knew that wasn't right. Hadn't Dani given him clues in the hallway of that Drenard prison?

"Nonsense. The odds are prohibitive. Look at the diversity of life on any one planet. An honest account of them is more bizarre than the differences between you and a filthy Bel Tra. No, my little Chosen One, the reason the Bern look alike all across the universe, the way they are able to rule all of creation with an iron and beneficent embrace, is simple: we set everything up in advance."

Cole continued to stare at his palms; he peered at the lines in them. "You *made* us?"

"Almost," Byrne said. "There are problems now and then. We just get the—to use a Terran expression—the ball rolling. And most times, the ball is kind enough to go downhill, following the route we set up in advance. It's all about *rules*, you see. If the laws of nature are within certain parameters, you get a universe conducive to life. And when you can rig impervious seeds full of genetic information, seeds that can only be blown apart by the forces present at the end of the universe, seeds that ablate just right during the creation process, then you achieve what all life seeks."

"Which is?" Cole asked.

"Immortality, of course."

Byrne smiled. "And not the temporary sort. We're not talking organ transplants, or colonies on a different egg but still in the same solar basket. We're talking about *real* descendants surviving the end of time and making it through to the *next* beginning."

"But it's all *your* life, right? Only what *you* decide lives and ever gets that chance."

"Most of it. But then, we're setting up our universes to be warm and wet, which is a habitat conducive to other sorts of breeding, mutating brands of scum. The problem for *these* life forms is that we've given ourselves a head start. And the… *unique* method we use to communicate with the next generation is tied to our DNA, so we know what's going on first. Of course, there have been mutations in the past that outpaced our local representatives, but since intergalactic

spaceflight is—or has been thought to be—impossible, these were just pockets of annoyance scrubbed away every twenty billion years or so, motes that contaminated a mere galaxy or two, but what are a few galaxies in the grand scheme of things? Practically nothing."

"So why are you flanking with us now?" Cole asked. "Give us our twenty billion years and leave our galaxy alone."

Byrne shook his head. "No can do, Chosen One. Everything is different now. Past mutations were a mere bump in the road compared to what happened in your Milky Way. The rules have been rewritten. Our entire empire has been thrown into discord. This isn't one of those changes we log in the master program and tweak our next go-around."

"I don't understand. *What's* different? And why do you keep calling me the Chosen One?"

"Hyperspace is what's different. We never knew it was there. A twenty-fifth dimension? It made no sense. Twenty-four is such a perfect number. Now, keep in mind, my ancestors were just like *you* thousands of iterations ago. They were a single species trapped inside the gravity well of their home galaxy with no chance of escape. When they realized the end of the universe was approaching, they could watch the Big Crunch coming—mathematically, of course, not visibly—but they were powerless to stop it. But then the seeds were invented, and the first program was written.

"And what looked like a problem at first, the Big Crunch, actually turned out to be a golden opportunity. Travelling between galaxies was prohibitively expensive. Space begins stretching faster than you can cross it, so there's no way for one species to spread out and ensure their survival. Even if you got there, what had you accomplished? Long term, I mean? Even *galaxies* are doomed as they collide into one another. That means no one place is safe, and even with hyperspace, not all places can be reached. How much better, then, to wait until all places come to you!" Byrne beamed at Cole, clearly excited to be having the conversation.

"The first seed made the *next* universe even more conducive to life. The very laws of nature were tweaked. Carbon was made more eager to chain with itself. Water was given a wider range of fluid temperatures. The primordial elements, the building blocks of life, were put into place ahead of time. Everything needed to create more Bern and to educate them, to prepare them for the next trip around—"

"I'm sorry," Cole interrupted, "even if all this is true, I don't see what it has to do with *us*. Besides, why didn't we stumble onto this Program? If we were made just like you, why don't we know this stuff?"

"You *do* stumble onto them," Byrne said. "Fragments, anyway.

You see them in visions and dreams, and you hear them as voices in your heads. They are the very elements of your religions and your superstitions. This is why so many of them have so much in common. Your species plays these slices of our instructions over and over, but you hear only small chunks, and you hear them out of order. You inspect shards of the Program as if they were the whole."

"You say that like we're some sort of computer drive."

"That's a perfect analogy. Only, we write with four bits instead of two, and we coil them together in what you call DNA. The problem is, your drives are fragmented. Everything is haphazard, even as you continue to read them sequentially." Byrne laughed. "The priceless irony is that you label as junk the most important parts of your DNA!"

Cole shook his head. "That's not possible."

"Look around you and say that again."

Cole didn't have to. It sounded foolish and naive the first time he had said it.

"This entire cluster of galaxies is infected. *That's* why you're different, why our code didn't take, not fast enough anyway. There's a mutation here that threatens everything. Everything my people—billions of generations of them over thousands of cycles—have worked to create."

"What?" Cole placed a hand on his chest. "*Us? We're* the mutation?" He crossed his arms, shoving his hands in his pits to keep them warm. "So being the *Chosen One* isn't really a compliment, huh?"

"Not from our perspective, no. The Drenards in your galaxy named you that. They hold out hope for our extinction, thinking a Human will be the one to effect it. Some crazy old bat foresaw the end of our entire race. A complete impossibility, of course, but enough of her other predictions hit home that some of my people became worried. As this Prophecy spread, it made many of us nervous. We began looking for the signs, for someone both a Human and Drenard. We had a few scares, years ago, but now—after thousands of years—things are finally playing out in our favor. And as everything falls together, new programs are being written for the next passing, new defenses erected in case of—"

"Defenses? Against *us*? Or against the Drenards?"

"The Drenards?" Byrne laughed. "They are a non-issue. There's always a few species that evolve and put up a noble fight. None of them matter, even if they defeat an entire galaxy full of Bern. What is their conquest? Temporary lordship over a small cluster of stars for twenty billion years? The end will consume them, and our seeds will spread on the winds of finality.

"No, the real threat is much smaller and more nefarious. It's the substance that polluted this entire galaxy, the mutation that threatens

all of creation—" Byrne's voice climbed and continued to climb as he went on, "—it's the foul slime that coats and smothers our program, eating all!"

Cole leaned away from the outburst, pulling his arms tighter to his chest.

"Cyclidinous," Byrne hissed, his voice full of venom.

"Do *what?*"

"The organisms, the single-celled monsters that move the stuff of life through hyperspace, spreading throughout your cluster of galaxies. Cyclidinious is what they're called. *That's* the mutation I speak of, not you."

"Never heard of it," Cole said. "But if it's screwing you guys and helping us, I'm a fan."

"Oh, you've heard of it," Byrne said. "You *reek* of it. It's your damned fusion fuel! *That's* what it's made of."

Byrne's angry words drifted off, swirling in a pocket of calm air around the mast. And in a land where time did not agree, where events did not always happen at the same time, at the same pace, or in the proper order, it was an unusual and lucky circumstance for his annoyed utterance to linger at that very moment.

For the very substance Byrne cursed, the answer to a riddle that had gravely puzzled Cole, suddenly brought forth a small group of armed men. A raid—a suicidal mission through hyperspace—being launched against the very first group to ever attempt such a thing.

They came, focused, clad in white and wielding invisible swords. They were looking for the One, not knowing it was far too late for prophecies.

Or perhaps, just unwilling to accept it.

Part XIII – Visitors

"We are all of us—everywhere and at all times—mere visitors."

~The Bern Seer~

19

While Anlyn guided the Bern ship toward one of the distant structures, Edison repeated his speech one more time, just in case anyone was listening. Anlyn felt soothed by his sonorous voice, even though the words sounded like complete gibberish. *Unlike his English*, she laughed to herself, *which only sounds like* half *gibberish*.

Anlyn had arbitrarily chosen the middle of the three major stations to head toward. Each of them was covered with long docking arms to accept massive ships; as a result, they looked like pincushions with the needles inserted at precise intervals. What really looked odd about the stations, however, was that they all stood perfectly empty.

Anlyn glanced over at Edison as he wrapped up his speech one more time. They waited.

Nothing.

"Do you still think it's a good idea to explore that station?" Anlyn asked in Drenard.

"Absolutely," Edison said, replying in kind. He peered through the canopy at the distant structures hanging in the void. "It would've been quite the raid if your cousin had left the way open. There's nothing here to stop us."

"I'm actually shocked he let us through at all. But you're right, this has been anti-climactic." Anlyn paused and pointed to her screen. "Hey, according to these charts, we're going to pass near a major jump point on the way. There's at least a dozen of those route lines converging on a few spots, probably where they directed outbound traffic. You think we should stop and look for any trace signatures?"

"I don't follow," Edison said.

"Hyperdrive traces," Anlyn said. She turned to him, reminded once again that her betrothed was a genius, but he hadn't been exposed to *everything*. He just seemed so comfortable with space flight —and technology in general—that she found it easy to forget he'd grown up around none of it.

"When you jump through hyperspace," she explained, "you leave a signature. They fade over time, but if someone jumped out in the last few days, we could possibly get a general idea of where they went."

"Fascinating," Edison said. He leaned over the ship's computer and typed away. His fingers paused for a split second. "I found a help file on it," he murmured, then went back to typing furiously.

"Great," Anlyn said. "That means I'm going to be the expert on the subject for another five whole minutes."

Edison turned his head and flashed his teeth, which made Anlyn

laugh. Edison snorted, which really got her going. The two of them chuckled and wheezed far more than the moment merited—perhaps laughing off some of the day's anxiety. They laughed with tears in their eyes, with a mind to stop laughing and soon. They laughed with the release of trauma, with the energy that probably should've found an escape with a good cry. Most of all, though, they laughed to fake it. They laughed for each other.

It took a moment for Anlyn to compose herself, to keep from carrying on like that forever. She took deep breaths, her heart pounding in her back as the sad echoes of their gaiety filtered aft through the empty ship. She wiped her eyes and looked up at Edison, a somber smile on her face.

"Love, what in the galaxy are we doing here?"

"I'm just following you," Edison said between pants.

"I'm serious. Are we crazy? Are we wasting our time? What were we thinking?"

Edison finally stopped laughing and gazed out at the wasteland of empty starship stations. He took a deep breath, his chest swelling to fill his tunics. "I'd rather be here than around that table, arguing with your people," he said. "I was always more up for a good raid than a council meeting." He turned to Anlyn, his face suddenly full of sadness. "Now my brother, he would've preferred the other."

Anlyn felt a chill at the sudden turn in the conversation. She held her breath, torn between her desire to chase the topic and the fear of scaring Edison away—back to his native English. She toyed with the SADAR using the few buttons she had memorized and watched as he began the trace scan on his own screen. Anlyn took advantage of the distraction:

"You hardly ever mention your brother. Why is that?"

Edison fiddled with the dials along the edge of his SADAR. He cleared his throat, and Anlyn braced for a bout of English techno-babble.

"My brother and I didn't see the universe the same way," he said.

Edison fell silent; Anlyn turned to face him. She watched him move to his other display and flip through pages of Bern writing. His head went from side to side as he scanned the lines. She held her breath as he read a few pages and made an adjustment to the scan. Finally, the scan having begun, he turned away and looked out his porthole.

"You don't have to talk about it—" Anlyn said.

"I killed him," Edison blurted out.

"Love." Anlyn reached over and ran her fingers through the fur on his arm. Suddenly, she didn't want him to talk. She didn't desire to hear, to know. She felt guilty for ever wanting to drag anything out of

him before he was ready. “I didn’t mean to bring that up,” she said. “We don’t have to talk about your home—”

“No.” Edison shook his head. “Before that, before the EMP, my brother and I fought in a bunker. Cole and Molly were there and… and I killed a member of the council with my bare hands. Then I left my brother in there. I left him in that bunker to die, knowing what I was about to do.”

Edison turned and faced Anlyn, tears streaming across his fur.

“I hated him,” he said. “I hated my brother, but exterminating my entire people was easy compared to that—” He stopped, too choked up to continue.

Anlyn reached for him; she wrapped both arms around his head and cooed softly. In the back of her neck, her heart stabbed with pain, hurting at having brought the subject up. Or maybe—at hearing him say the same things in her own language that she’d been used to puzzling through in his rigid English.

“I love you,” she said in the common, Drenard form.

“And I you,” Edison replied.

So they held each other, floating beyond the Great Rift on the Bern side of the universe, Edison with his head snuggled against her tunics, Anlyn with her cheek resting on his fur. They stayed like that for several minutes, precisely the length of time it took the Bern computer to crunch the hyperspace signatures.

And thereby destroy the mood.

20

Walter slapped his flightsuit, thumping the Wadi on its head, but the stupid thing just continued to squirm in his pocket. He reached the end of the alley and rounded the corner, having decided to try the building with the thick door first, mostly to stick to the same order as before. Unlike other Palans, he *liked* order.

As he reached the wooden sidewalk, he merged with a weaving stream of boisterous and drunk nighttime people. He stuck close to the side of the building, wincing at the sound of the traffic blaring in the street.

Just ahead, he spotted a wallet bulging in a back pocket, the badge of a tourist. He scooted forward, drying his hands on his flightsuit, before he remembered what he was supposed to be doing:

He was looking for Molly.

He shook his head, turned, and surveyed the building next to him.

It was lit up inside, but he didn't see an open or closed sign. He cupped his hands around his face and leaned close, trying to look past the glare of light bouncing back and forth between the glass and his face. The interior seemed shallow, just a bit of standing room and a tall counter that ran the width of the building. Two large Humans worked behind the counter moving boxes and doing boring, officey stuff.

Walter stepped back to look for a sign on the building. The only thing he found was a single line etched into the large pane of glass:

TALLY INC — YOUR ELECTION HQ

That narrowed it down. Walter knew how Molly felt about politics, no way would she have followed Cat in there. Besides, hadn't that ticket guy said something about a pub?

He turned and squeezed through the crowd, passing the dark alley to see what the other building was. The first thing he noticed was all the neon lights in the windows, the glowing tubes bent into the shapes of frothy mugs and gigantic bottles. *Definitely* a pub.

A cluster of figures stumbled out the front door—Humans and otherwise—somehow staying upright by clinging to their fellow drunks. Walter frowned at them. He waited for the group to pass before ducking through the entrance and into a small foyer, where he found a second set of double-doors. These were slathered with posters

for upcoming events and hand-scrawled pages put up by people selling things. A half-dozen flash drives dangled from the ends of the latter, no doubt loaded with product pictures and info. Walter considered stealing a few—he knew how to wipe and unlock them for general use—then remembered he had an entire sock drawer full of them on *Parsona*.

He thumped the Wadi one more time before pushing the doors open and stepping into the pub. The blatting traffic and yelling from outside were immediately replaced with a smoky, clamorous din that somehow managed to be worse. A wall of large shouting aliens—Humans mostly—crowded a bar running the length of one wall. The rest of the place was filled with small tables surrounded by clusters of mismatched chairs, but nobody seemed to be sitting in them. Much of the furniture had been pushed aside to create a clearing where another raucous crowd stood in a vibrating mass. Pushing and yelling, holding their beers aloft and splashing their neighbors, it looked like a bunch of Palan pirates gambling on a game of Rats.

Walter stepped closer, trying to peek between the forest of legs, but they were too dense. He went to one of the tables instead and pushed aside the collection of empties and smoldering ashtrays. Using one of the chairs, he stepped to the top of the table and took a quick look at the center of the group, trying to sate his curiosity quickly before one of the barmaids told him to get down.

It was a fight. A big man was beating on a little one, the latter's face so covered in blue blood he couldn't even make out its race. He tried to remember how many species bled blue as the little one's head whipped around from a heavy blow, the crack of bone-on-bone coming just before another roar from the crowd. Long hair flew out in an arc, blonde with streaks of light blue.

Walter recognized the hair, the only thing he'd noticed from the stupid show. The little person was the woman they were after! And she was getting her ass kicked.

Walter looked around for Molly, wondering where she had gotten off to. He jumped down from the table and started for the bar, saw the thick wall of patrons there and stopped. He turned back to the fight, not knowing what to do.

The Wadi clawed him through his secret pocket, tiny claws jabbing into his flesh, the stinging pinpricks spreading as the creature's toxins coursed through his veins.

Walter thumped the thing on the head and fought to come up with a plan. He cursed Molly for disappearing whenever he seemed to really need her.

••••

The man standing over Molly yelled across the room to the others. “Hey boss? I think she *is* local. Been voting as if, anyway.”

The man with the beard strolled over and checked a small screen. Molly groaned at him, pleading in her head for them to remove the foul rag. She gagged again and started coughing, her cheeks puffing against the tape and cloth.

“Hmmm. Pretty good cyclid count. Either she was born here, or she’s been on-planet a while.” He looked up at the larger man. “Good work. Take it all and label it Bekkie for now.”

“Thanks, boss.” The brute looked down at Molly and winked, as if this were good news for both of them. “Five liters,” he said to himself. “That’s a buck seventy ounces at eight thousand an ounce.”

“Divided by two!” the other guy yelled.

The man frowned and glowered at the speaker. After a moment, he smiled again. “Still, I can’t even do the math, which means a good night. A *very* good night.”

He whistled to himself and picked up a needle from the tray before inspecting it. Molly raised her head and yelled into the blood-soaked rag; she banged the back of her skull against the metal table and flexed her biceps as hard as she could against the restraints.

“Ah, there’s our vein,” the guy said. He slapped her arm with a flat palm. Molly looked down at her elbow as he brought the needle close. She tried moving it side to side to avoid the plunge, but the man just tightened his grip, causing the purple web beneath her skin to stand out even more.

He shoved the needle into the biggest of them.

Molly felt a burning sensation up and down her arm. She groaned as blood squirted out the back of the needle and splashed against the man’s apron.

“Damn!” He fumbled with a valve at the end of the needle and got it closed; Molly fought to not pass out. She watched him place several strips of tape across the inserted device before untangling coils of clear tubing and hanging empty bags from the side of the table.

Across the room, the other two men chuckled at something, making the scene too bizarre for Molly to comprehend. The laughter and horror didn’t mix, they just wrapped around each other, swirling like oil and water.

A distant voice called out amid the laughter: “Hey Paulie, anything you spill is coming out of your cut!”

And that *really* got them going.

21

Anlyn pulled out of Edison's embrace as the hyperdrive traces flared up on the nav screen. She tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. Edison glanced at her screen and grunted at the results.

"We just missed them!" Anlyn said.

Edison brought up a different display on his own screen and typed something on the keyboard. The info showed on Anlyn's as well, but she couldn't read any of the numbers. Still, she didn't have to know what they said. The intensity of the signatures was more than enough.

"This is impossible," Anlyn said. "You don't see traces like this except for right after someone jumps. These are too fresh to be—"

"They're a week old," Edison said.

"No, love, these are brand new." She hit the zoom button, bringing the scope out. The traces were spread throughout the entire system. Hundreds of them. "This doesn't make any sense."

"The computer says they're a week old, and it has a destination."

"*A* destination? They all go to the same place?"

Edison grunted. "You're right. This doesn't make any sense."

"What? Where do they lead?" She hated not being able to read the screen, relying on just the raw images.

Edison flipped over to the nav chart, pulling it up on both screens. He zoomed in on a single point.

"Here," he said.

Anlyn couldn't read the name under the object, but she recognized the symbol from Bern charts. It was a star. A class V star.

"They jumped into a *star?* So the traces are blowback." Anlyn shook her head. "That explains the strength and age. Maybe they *are* a week old. But still, why would they… why jump into a *star?*"

"I'm not a big fan of the prophecy," Edison said. "You know that. But I also don't like coincidences. Do you think—?"

"That the Bern are *gone*? Mass suicide? No. Only because I've learned to not jump to my favorite conclusions."

"Give me an alternative."

"Okay…" Anlyn thought for a moment. "They scuttled their ships before moving off, keeping them out of our hands."

Edison frowned.

"Or they… maybe it was a waste-disposal program."

"Only if they were disposing themselves of ships. A dozen of these signatures come up as the same class and model as this one."

"Maybe there's a rift in the center of that star!"

Edison shook his head. "Wouldn't work. The mass in the star

would just leak out to the other side. No, I think they did it on purpose. Maybe they figured out some way to slingshot past your barrier. They could be attacking Drenard right now."

"Don't say that. And we were on Drenard a week ago. I—should we still go explore one of these stations, or should we jump along a few trade routes until we bump into someone? There's a ton of settled worlds on this map."

"What about jumping *after* them?" Edison asked.

"*What*? Jump into the center of that star? Have you melted your mind?"

"It was just a suggestion," Edison said. "Then again, think about it, think about where we are. This is the front line of the Bern-Drenard war. We're standing in the trenches of the most important standoff in your history. Do you really think they just left? Or that they killed themselves? I think it's more likely they aren't here because the front has moved *elsewhere*."

"I know you hate it when I say this, but I don't understand. Even without the English."

Edison blew out his breath, then sucked in another deep one. "At almost the exact instant your Circle voted to change a tactic that has been in place for thousands and thousands of years, the moment they decided to move out of their arm of the Milky Way, the Bern disappear? Like I said, I loathe coincidences more than I hate prophecies."

"*More*?" Anlyn asked, doubting him.

"Absolutely. A prophecy might be nothing more than a prediction, or a well-reasoned theory with flowery language. A major coincidence like this? I just don't buy it."

"What they did, if these scans are correct, it seems suicidal," Anlyn said. "Desperate. Like something we should be celebrating instead of getting worried about." Anlyn looked from the screens to the orbital base they had been approaching. "I say we go check out that station, maybe broadcast our message a few more times."

Edison lowered his brows, peering at the distant station. Eventually, he nodded. "That seems logical. Still, something tells me we should follow them, but perhaps there is more to that than just jumping to a precise spot. A modification of some sort…"

"Exactly," Anlyn said, not enjoying his line of reasoning. She turned to one of the stations and increased thrust. Edison adjusted the SADAR for her so she could see any major debris in the way. But no matter how much he played with the gain, the SADAR remained dominated by the hyperdrive traces: bright, big blooms of pixilated energy.

They were like the ghosts of something fierce, haunting the dark

closet Anlyn had been taught to fear her entire life. But now, having stepped through that mystical and lore-filled door, she had found the closet to be perfectly empty, a prospect somehow worse.

As they approached one of the traces, she felt her cold side dominating. The absence of the bad men—not knowing where they were *right then*—was far more powerful than their presence. It was as if they could be around *any* corner, or off doing worse things than merely lurking in her imagination.

Anlyn found herself holding her breath as she flew through the hyperdrive trace, a hollow feeling in her chest matching the ghostlike apparitions hanging in the void. As she pierced the image, she thought about what would drive someone to jump into the center of a star, and the fear she had felt when Edison had hinted at doing just that.

22

At first, the attackers were nothing more than extra blurs below, mere background noise in the bizarre world in which Cole had found himself. It wasn't until objects on the deck fell still—as dead bodies are wont to do—that Cole realized something was amiss.

Out of a blur, a body appeared on the deck, its limbs at odd angles, a large pool of blood popping into existence with incredible speed.

The fur-clad guards at the base of the platform stomped up the steps, and Cole wondered for a moment if his jailors were about to become his protectors. He looked to Byrne, expecting some words of wisdom or advice.

"Kill the One!" Byrne barked to the men.

Cole rose from his seat and backed away. "Wait!" he said.

Two of the men pulled out long wooden handles and wielded them as if they contained blades. After seeing what had happened to Riggs's leg, Cole didn't feel like testing the illusion.

One of the men lunged forward, raising his arms. Cold grabbed his metal chair; he spun and slung it at the man's face.

It flew right at the man, turning once in the air—and then it split in two, falling to either side and past the guy. Cole glanced at the ten meter drop to the deck—a height like a three-story building—and took another step back. Two of the men circled toward the other side of the mast, trying to get behind him.

Cole turned and moved toward the rear of the pedestal, hoping to put the large, flat tower between him and his attackers. One of the fur-shrouded figures yelled for him to stop—or yelled to the others to stop him. As Cole backed away, the man's scream plummeted through several octaves and seemed to draw out forever. He also noticed the blurs moving across the deck below had turned into statues, and the men running after him on the pedestal seemed to swim through molasses.

Still—they slowly gained, and Cole could sense they would soon pierce whatever barrier he had stepped through and be upon him with their swords. With no place to run, the decision to jump no longer seemed like a decision at all. Cole moved to the edge of the pedestal and nearly lost his balance as it twitched beneath his feet. He knelt down, grabbed the lip, and lowered himself over the edge to minimize the fall. Holding on by his fingertips, he had a brief pang of doubt before letting go.

He kept his body spread out across the smooth metal surface, hoping the friction from his flightsuit would slow the fall. It worked

better than it should have, as he almost seemed to float to the ground, sliding through the air as if it were fluid. When he hit the deck, however, his knees still buckled from the height of the fall. Cole rolled with the impact, pushed up into a crouch, and looked around, wondering where to run to, which small metal building to hide inside of, when the men from above came raining down around him with uncanny slowness.

Cole dashed between two of them before they could get to their feet, and several other fighters across the deck noticed him. One of them pointed, and the rest gave chase. Cole sprinted into one of the alleys created by the squat structures, angling toward the port side of the deck. As he got away from the mast, everyone started to move at the same rate of time again—and most of them in *his* direction.

Fleeing through the haphazard twists and turns of the tight alleys reminded Cole of his nefarious Portuguese childhood. He felt right at home as he changed directions repeatedly, snaking his way aft.

Skirting the wide clearing from earlier, he tried to get his bearings, to locate the room they'd kept him and Riggs in. Several times, he found himself dodging hellish scenes of gore littered across the deck. Dead bodies—some clad in so much fur they looked like roadkill—lay in hacked up pieces amid large pools of blood. They weren't the only dead; the other figures that had shown up lay here and there in white combat gear turned grisly shades of pink by the time Cole ran past.

When he came to a wider area with less cover, Cole glanced back to find several pursuers gaining on him. He looked ahead again just in time to dodge around another puddle of death; he ran past the nastiness while searching for an alley to dodge down.

Checking over his shoulder, Cole saw that two pursuers had attempted to cut him off. They slipped in the puddle of gore and fell, covered in blood. Cole darted behind one of the low buildings, then changed direction and ran directly aft, hopefully keeping the building between himself and those chasing after. Once he crossed the open area, he ran around the next shack and hugged the back, pausing to catch his breath. He knew he couldn't keep up such a pace forever, especially not with his heart and adrenaline going full-bore.

He slowly made his way to the far side of the small shack, sucking in deep gulps of oxygen as he went. When he got to the corner, he peeked around and saw a cluster of men running toward an adjacent structure; they were following along in the last direction they'd seen him running. Cole looked forward, toward the bow of the moving village, and didn't see any threats heading his way. He did, however, notice something familiar. The tall mast—the size of it from that distance and the buildings blocking the view of its base—it all looked

identical to the first time he'd noticed it. He *had* to be close to the room he and Riggs had been held in.

Cole pressed his ear to the wall next to him. Nothing. But if Riggs was dead from his wounds, that's exactly what he'd expect. And anyway, with the way people were blurred into motion while he was with Byrne—there was no telling how much time had passed during their conversation. Perhaps they'd already disposed of his body, or taken him someplace else.

He considered all these possibilities as he made his way around the side of the building. Shouts could be heard in the distance, growing closer. Cole stole around to the front of the small structure and pulled open the door he found there.

Bingo.

He immediately recognized the inclined racks with their dangling restraints, even though they seemed to have been rearranged. What's more, he knew that tangy scent of blood, a hint of which remained in the air. He looked to the floor for signs of it, expecting to find a wide streak heading toward the drain along with dotted trails spurting off in one direction, but they had already cleaned it up. There was no sign of Riggs. Not even a part of him.

Cole turned to leave. Surely they would eventually look for him in the only room he'd been inside of. He wondered which direction he should head: aft into the unknown, or forward and toward the Firehawk. He was about to set foot outside and let fate decide for him, when loud footsteps began approaching from the side of the shack. Cole jumped back into the room and shut the door as quickly and quietly as he could.

The thunder of several running men passed, and a sense of panic crept up in Cole's chest. *What good is running?* He thought. *Where would I go?*

The severity of his situation began to sink in: he was trapped in hyperspace with a collection of ancient Earth bandits, and the things Byrne had told him about the universe—the utter scale of time and space and destruction—it made all his petty concerns of self-preservation seem ridiculously small. Temporary, at best. The sane course of action, he began to suspect, had been to stay put. He should probably just step out with his hands up and turn himself in.

The sound of someone running up to the door ended that internal debate. The natural tendency to run—to protect himself—surged through his body, surfing a second wave of adrenaline. Cole grabbed the door handle and held it tight just as someone outside tried to operate it.

The bar twisted in his hands. He tried to grip it hard enough to make it seem locked, but it moved just enough—with the tension of

tendons rather than steel—that he knew the person outside wouldn't be fooled.

"Hey!"

The shout came through the door muffled but audible. Something thumped against the door, a hand or a lowered shoulder.

Again, with a dull thump.

Cole listened to two more before getting the timing down. He turned the handle the other direction, using the man's pressure against him, and pulled the door open right before the next blow came.

A fur-clad man stumbled inside, waving his arms for balance. Cole kicked the side of one knee to help the figure go down faster. The man let out an agonized roar and fell, clutching his leg. Cole jumped on him immediately, the metallic taste of awful necessity rising up in his throat as he pictured himself killing this man with his bare hands.

He jumped for the guy's back, hoping to strangle him from behind, but the man rolled out of the way and Cole ended up clutching his chest instead. He pulled himself on top of the figure; the man writhed in agony and kept trying to grab at the leg Cole had kicked.

Cole threw one of his own legs over the guy, straddling his waist. He kept his knees wide so the man on the bottom couldn't buck him off, locked his heels under the figure's legs to keep him from rolling over, and reached for his neck.

Ignoring the weak efforts to fend him off, Cole worked his hands past the fur, groping for raw flesh. The man's goggles—his face swaddled and obscured—made the job easier. They allowed him to forget what he was trying to do; he could simply pretend there wasn't a human inside.

Digging his thumbs into the soft depression below the Adam's apple, Cole squeezed as hard as he could against the main arteries, pulling both hands toward each other with his thumbs.

He thought clinical thoughts. This was just a task. Something that needed doing.

The man grabbed Cole's wrists, but he didn't have the leverage to do anything about the stranglehold. His hands just remained encircled there, gloveless and young-looking.

A weak croak, muffled by the fur, escaped the man's mouth. Cole turned away from the sight of what he was doing. The man tried to say something; Cole dug his thumbs into the trachea, not wanting to hear. It sounded like the man was going into shock, complaining about how cold he was even with all that fur around him.

Cole concentrated on nothing but the throbbing against his palm as he waited for the life to eke out of the man's body. He focused on the pulse, distracting himself with something mechanical. As it

became difficult to distinguish the man's raging heartbeat from his own, Cole knew the end was coming. The man's hands loosened their grip around his wrists and fell away, his elbows striking the metal decking. Both hands remained there for a moment—empty, but still shaped as if to grasp something. Finally, they too sagged to the floor, slowly like something inside still provided resistance.

Cole maintained a tight grip, knowing that he would pretend to go out in the same circumstance, lashing out as soon as his attacker pulled away. He waited until the muscles in his arms burned and his knuckles ached—only then did he take his hands away, his stomach churning with disgust.

A few flakes of snow drifted in through the open door behind him. Cole turned and realized how brazen and exhibitionist the murder had been. Reaching out, he threw the door shut with a metallic bang, dropping the room into complete darkness. He pushed his goggles up to his brow and surveyed his victim in the light filtered through the semi-transparent ceiling. He knew what he needed to do to delay his capture.

He pulled the boots off first, and then the man's fur jacket. He hesitated a moment before stripping the jerkins from his legs—more out of respect than embarrassment—then proceeded to loosen them up and tug them off as well.

The man's body offered quite a bit of resistance, the heaviness of death forcing Cole to struggle with the pants. As they came free, he noticed the legs were slathered in a purple mess, like a war-paint of some sort. Setting the clothing aside, he reached for the strips of fur around the man's face, having saved that for last. He hated to look, but he needed to see what he was doing in order to untangle the covering.

He lifted the man's head to unravel the continuous strip of fur. After the first wrap came away, he saw that the goggles were on top of the rest, the rubbery strap helping to hold it all in place. He pulled the goggles off and made the mistake of looking at the man's eyes. They stood open, tear-tracks of pain running back from the corners.

Cole tucked the goggles into one of the jacket pockets and looked away from the accusatory glare. Even with nothing of the man's face visible but those eyes, he couldn't take the sight. He worked blindly, staring down the man's body, gritting his teeth with the nastiness and intimacy of the task. As he untangled the head covering, he tried to lose himself in the bands of purple paint encircling the man's thighs. He wondered what their significance was. He unraveled more fur, one hand looping behind the man's neck, and he suddenly became even more fixated on the colorful bands of paint. There was a pink line wrapping around each, right above the man's knees and barely visible

through the purple stain.

Something stabbed Cole in the chest before he was fully aware of it on a conscious level—the primitive part of him outpacing his frontal lobe and reaching the awful truth first.

Flashes of terrible awareness strobed through his brain: an image of the man clutching at his leg; him thinking to look for Cole in that awful room; even what he had been trying to say right before he died. The man wasn't complaining of the cold, he had been saying a name, over and over.

All these things occurred to Cole at once, jumbled and overlapping. In a split second, he knew. He knew before he looked back to the man's face just why those frozen, tear-streaked eyes had bored into him so.

Holding the last of the rags, he turned to face the man he had just killed with his bare hands. He turned and begged the universe that he might be wrong. He didn't want to be right. He could feel the world swallowing him up if he was…

And he was.

23

Walter snuck up behind the circle of men, stooping down to see between their legs. It was like an orchard of poorly dressed stumps shifting to and fro. He squeezed past the outer layer, trying his best to ignore the easy pickings in such a melee—wallets and jewelry ripe and ready for harvest, begging to be plucked.

He shook his head and waited for a shift in the crowd to create an opening, then he surged forward, getting out of the way again before they crashed back into each other. The rowdy men seemed to sway with the sounds of the beating ahead, loosening up as they groaned, their arms flying in the air, then packing back in as they waited for the next blow.

Taking his time, getting a sense of the flow of the action, Walter gradually made his way to the inner edge of the circle, nearly on his knees he was stooping so low. He finally got a good look at the participants, just as the fight seemed to reach its conclusion. The lady Callite from the bubble—the one who had made the flood-awful sounds—was lying on the floor, a bloody mess. A large man stood over her, waving his hands to the crowd.

"No more!" someone yelled.

"C'mon, she's had enough!" screamed another.

The lady hollered something herself, flecks of blue foam spitting out of her mouth. Walter stared at her—amazed she was still conscious after bleeding so much—and tried to read her lips.

"More," it looked like she was saying. She waved at the man above her and tried to sit up. "More!" she groaned.

The crowd quieted down, sensing the show was over. The man above her shook his head. "That's plenty, Cat. You don't pay me enough for this."

Her head fell back to the floor as she struggled for something in her pocket. Walter watched intently, wanting to end the spectacle, wanting to *help* her, but not knowing why.

The man bent down and took something from her: a roll of money. He flicked through it, dropped a few pieces on her stomach, then stepped away. The lady curled her fist around the change and seemed to go limp.

The crowd dispersed—their tribal rumbles transforming into chairs scraping across the ground, hollered drink orders, and the crash of glass on glass in trashcans. Walter hurried over to the lady, compelled by the sight of her blood-covered form. He suddenly thought of his mother, but shook the memory away as he crept to the lady's side.

Her face was a mess, covered in blood the color of deep water. One of her eyelids cracked open; a bright eye swiveled around to study him—

Walter ran off, dashing to one of the tables. He grabbed a fistful of paper napkins, ignoring the men yelling insults at him, telling him to just leave her alone. He hurried back, falling to his knees and reaching out to dab her wounds.

"Flank off!" she yelled at him, knocking him back with incredible force.

Walter hissed in alarm and felt the Wadi go nuts in the pocket by his stomach. He moved close enough to the woman to talk, but stayed out of arm's reach.

"I'm Walter," he said.

The lady looked at him, her brown, scaly face covered with a film of blood, both of her eyes nearly swollen shut. "You're scrawny," she said.

Walter looked down at himself. "Leasst I'm in one piecse."

"If you's bigger, I'd ask you ta kick me," the woman said. She gave him one last appraising look, then allowed her battered head to settle back to the floor. She closed her eyes and ran a forked tongue over her busted lip.

"Leave her alone," a guy behind Walter said. Walter turned around to find a table had been scooted nearby; several men lounged around it, working on fresh, foamy drinks. "She'll be fine, little man. Best you can do is leave her be. Sammie will clean up the mess."

Walter ignored the guy and turned back to Cat. "We've been looking for you for two weekss," he told the lady.

"I'd congratulate ya, but I ain't been hiding." Her eyes remained closed as she spoke. "Now scram, or go buy me a beating."

Walter felt for his wad of cash, all the money he'd lifted since they got to Bekkie. He unzipped his loot pocket, inserted his hand—and regretted it immediately. The Wadi inside bit him, sending toxins through his knuckles. He grabbed it around the belly, the sensation of its soft flesh between his fingers reminding him of the one he'd crushed on Drenard. He considered repeating that feat, becoming twice the Drenard he currently was, but remembered what he'd reached in his pocket for. He yanked his hand out and strips of confetti followed—all that was left of the bills he'd stolen from the locals.

"Sstupid lizsard!" he yelled, zipping his pocket closed. He sucked on his burning knuckle, which just made his tongue sting. He looked down at the lady, who had one eye as open as it could get.

"Palan, huh?"

Walter nodded. He pulled his finger out of his mouth. "And proud

of it," he boasted.

"Grab us some chairs," the lady said. She grumbled to herself: "I hardly made enough tonight to *feel* it."

Walter had to go almost to the other side of the bar to find two unoccupied seats. He dragged them back, drawing glares from other patrons as they screeched across the floor. He almost expected the woman to be gone by the time he returned, but she was just sitting up.

"You with a sadist club?" she asked Walter, as he helped her into a chair. "Cause I still do those meetings for a fee."

"I don't think sso," Walter answered, picking up the napkins and holding them out to her. He felt happy when she accepted them. There was something about the woman he couldn't quite place; he'd seen a lot of bizarre alien stuff in his time, but nothing quite like her. "Why do you do this?" he asked.

The Callite leaned back in her chair. She looked him up and down as she wiped two kinds of blood off her hands. Somehow, having sat up, the swelling around her eyes didn't look quite as bad as it had before.

"You're too young to get it," she finally said. "Now, you wanting an autograph, or you got a paying gig?"

"I… we—" Walter looked around, expecting Molly to walk in at any moment; he wondered where in hyperspace she'd gone to. "My friend Molly hass been trying to find you. Ssomething about fussion fu __"

A sticky hand latched onto his mouth faster than a Wadi firing from a hole in a cliff. Walter looked down his nose at it; he peered across the brown arm it was attached to, tracing it up to the very stern and blood-streaked face. There was no doubt about it: the swelling around the lady's eyes had gone down a *lot*. He watched them dart from side to side before boring right through his skull.

"Who're you with?" she asked.

Walter mumbled into her palm.

"Softly, now," Cat said, pulling her hand away.

"Molly Fyde," he whispered, looking around.

"That's crap," the woman said. "How do you even know that name?"

Walter pointed to his flightsuit, at his name scrawled across his left breast. "I'm crew on the sstarsship *Parssona*," he hissed. "I'm the ssupply officser!"

The hand returned, grabbing Walter's collar and pulling him out of the seat, hauling him close to the lady's face—which, now that he was up-close, really seemed to be in not that bad of shape, to be honest.

"Where's the ship?" the lady demanded. "And where's Molly?"

Walter swallowed. Or tried to.
“I don’t know,” he whispered.

24

Cole cradled Riggs in his arms and sobbed. He held his old friend's neck, pressed Riggs's face up against his own, and cried as hard as he ever had. His body shook from the effort. Snot, saliva, and salt mixed on his lips as his moans turned into screams—mad, inhuman sounds that barely registered in his ears as his own voice.

He wanted to pound his friend's chest. He wanted to rip his own open. He wanted to claw out his heart and pack snow inside. Anything to fill the gaping, burning, crushing void he'd created there.

Deep down, something yelled at him to undo it, to bring his friend back. It wrestled aside the angry beast that had taken him over, giving him instructions on CPR, telling him it wasn't too late. But before he could think to begin, the door burst open, filling the room with harsh light and forcing him to bring his goggles back down.

Cole turned and saw that his inhuman screams had summoned men dressed up as animals. And something odd seized him. That beast within took over, and Cole fell into a dream-like state untouched by time, a nightmare of slow and fast in which he was but a passenger riding along inside someone else's skull. He felt a body around him, but it wasn't his. That body jumped up, taking him along with it, elevating his view. He watched the body's fists fly at a face.

You aren't supposed to punch that hard, he felt like telling the body, but the arms kept going straight out, impacting a skull, trying to punch straight through it.

Blood splattered and leaked out from between the strips of fur covering the man's face; Cole watched the mangled hand hit again, knowing it was broken. Not knowing it was his.

The other man swung his arms as if he held an invisible bat. The person Cole occupied—whose brain he resided in—seemed to jump back reflexively. The torso of the man with the bleeding face flew apart, his insides spilling out like red ropes soaked in oil.

The nightmare slowed down even further as the opened man collapsed, and Cole's bodily vehicle slipped in the mess. The man with the invisible bat swung again, his black goggles seeming to pop with rage.

Cole felt himself duck inside the skull, willing the man he was occupying to get low. They crashed down as one, and the invisible blade made a noise above. He watched as two arms—arms he should recognize as his own—scrambled ahead, swimming through the blood and mess on the decking, trying to reach the dangerous man with the invisible blade.

The broken hand reached out and clutched the opened man's

torso, grabbing his lifeless furs and pulling forward. Somehow, Cole could feel the vehicle's legs pushing and slipping in the blood; they propelled the scene ahead, lurching for the man with the goggles whose brow hinted at wild, unseen eyes.

A hand grabbed the swordsman's thigh. Cole watched, completely detached, as it yanked the man down, the slick blood assisting as it spread out beneath them. The man's arms wind-milled, swinging for balance. He landed in a heap, then brought the invisible blade up, preparing to swing. Cole watched other hands—hands he barely recognized as his own—grab the man's arms and wrestle them down. He admired the way the good hand pinned the man's wrist while the mangled hand went to work on his face. That hand was no good as anything but a club, anyway. He wondered what it would feel like to own a hand destroyed like that. What the sensation might be like to ball crushed bone into something resembling a fist and throw it, as hard as one could, into a solid thing. Over and over.

He wondered how that would feel, because he couldn't know. He watched the scene for a little while, the horror slowly speeding up to real-time before he grew bored of it. The striking stopped.

Cole couldn't even tell what the hand had been hitting. Below him lay a red mess, the orb of one eye dangling from a bundle of nerves. It hung out of something misshapen and leaking. And what had been a crushed hand, now looked like ground-up meat. Splinters of white bone stuck out where knuckles once were, all of it dripping with blood.

The person he was riding inside staggered to its feet, legs wobbly and shaking. It moved toward the light, toward the rectangle of air filled with sparkling flakes that rode on the wind. Unable to do anything but watch, Cole rode along as the person left the small room, taking him out as well, out into a world full of silent fighting.

Men were everywhere, men and aliens, fighting in clusters. It all had the sloppiness of a dream as people split in two and some seemed to disappear altogether. Cole watched the legs beneath him march away from it all, moving toward the edge of the deck where more light and sparks of whiteness—miniature angels—danced and beckoned, offering a calm, seductive reprieve.

When several men came running after him, after the body he was in, Cole hardly noticed the legs beneath him begin to kick. *To Run*. He jounced around inside the skull—confused trapped and alone—riding along and screaming for everything to stop.

The men gave chase, swishing the air with nothingness. Cole could only see them when the head he was huddled inside turned around. Mostly, though, it looked forward, giving him a view of the approaching rail. But he was more concerned about the men, having

seen what those blades could do. The body ran—the railing was so near—yet the legs beneath him continued to churn across the frosted deck.

He felt trapped, a little creature in someone's head. He imagined his tiny arms and legs stretched out, pressing on the walls of the skull, straining to hold himself in place. He wanted to steer away from the rail, away from the edge of the metal deck, but the thing he rode inside sprinted on. He could feel the blades whiz behind him as they threaten to spill him out of the skull and onto the decking.

The body hit the rail at full speed. It bent in half at the waist, tumbling over. The head holding Cole became inverted. He had a brief glimpse of the snowy ground rushing past—far, far below. He grabbed at the controls for the arms, urging them to do his bidding. The nightmare slowed, proceeding at a crawl, each moment drip, drip, dripping.

Then: a hand gripping. Gripping the rail. Both hands now, clutching the metal bar, stopping his plummet. One of them was whole, the other a disgusting mess. Above, several men gathered, their pants and gasps puffing out like smoke. They looked down over the rail, black goggles wrapped with fur. Cole watched from his prison as they scrambled for the arms, trying to pull the body back into the nightmare.

The view turned, forcing Cole to look back down at the ground, at the inhospitable wasteland of snow racing by. When the view returned to the rail, the hands were leaving the arms, one man pushing the others away.

Cole recognized him, recognized the blonde hair and small goggles.

Joshua.

Joshua smiled, almost as if he could see Cole through the goggles, could see inside the body's skull where he was cowering, confused and afraid.

Joshua held something over the rail: a wooden stick, hanging from another wooden stick.

Cole froze. He leaned closer to the inside of the body's eyes; he pressed his palms against the pupils and peered out, staring at the familiar device.

Joshua swung the invisible thread right at him—right at the skull he'd receded into. Cole screamed at the hands to let go, at the arms to come up and block the blow.

The good arm still had enough fear in it to obey, but the mangled one did not. One hand let go, coming up in front of the skull to protect him; the ruined hand somehow kept its grip. Cole braced himself as the body he was in rotated on the single grasp of that bloody, pulped

hand. He watched as the invisible thread flew past, seeming to miss everything.

But then, he started falling away. He fell into the sinking embrace of open air even though one arm remained fastened to the rail—remained there, frozen in the shape of a claw.

Cole stared at it from within the head, watched it slide away from the body along a neat line of red separation.

My body, Cole thought.

This is me.

That arm, still grasping the railing, he finally understood it to be a part of him. He came to the realization moments after it was no longer true.

His good arm waved in the wisps of snow, but he focused on the other one. He watched the dismembered limb as he fell away from it, watched it remain up high, dripping blood through the whizzing white. The arm became smaller, a tiny piece of meat stuck to the side of the ship, as he fell away, down to the snowy drifts below.

Air roared past his ears. Accelerating. Stomach rising with the speed. He landed with a pained crunch, a thump of lifeless heft. His body smashed through the hard, frozen exterior of the snow and drove down, deep down into the soft wetness.

The cold seeped into his bones immediately. Cole lifted his head. He pushed up with one arm to get his face out of the moisture, away from the tight hole he'd created. He wiggled back and forth, yelling at the pain and horror of it all, the frustration of not being able to move, of being wrapped in the freezing embrace.

His right arm came free. He looked down at it, saw how the limb ended in the middle of his bicep. Blood arced out in spurts, melting red canyons into the wall of white before him.

Cole fought to free his other hand from the clutches of the packed snow. He yelled and yanked it free, grabbed a handful of snow and pushed it against the wound. The raw, exposed nerves burned with pain beyond compare. He could hear himself screaming, could feel the white world around him growing dark. He struggled against the dying sensation, kicked at the brutality of it all, shook with rage at the approaching blackness squeezing in around him…

Cole collapsed forward. His eyes rolled up behind his lids, and his face fell into the cold and wet.

25

A cylindrical column of blood marched out of Molly's arm and snaked through the twisted tube attached to the needle. Molly felt faint from watching it leave her body; she could feel her pulse shoving against her temples. She shook her head and pushed at the rag with her tongue, trying to find room to breathe. Beside her, the large man prepared a row of empty bags, hanging them one at a time from the side of her table.

One of the other men in the room told another joke, and everyone laughed. The man over Molly slapped her table with his hand, then wiped his eyes. The sight of his yellowish teeth, his mouth pulled back in a smile, his apron covered in blood—the banality of it all made her realize: the end of her would come right there on that table. No remorse. No heroics. Nothing special. She just stepped into a dark alley, and was *gone*. Soon to be a few bags of votes vibrating with punch lines.

She laid her head back and concentrated on her heartbeat, on slowing down the thumps against her temples, if for no other reason than to be resistant. She breathed slowly through her nose and focused on the gradual rise and fall of her chest against the tight restraints—

Another quip from someone and the room rocked with more laughter.

Another bag was hung.

••••

"Aren't you hurt?" Walter asked Cat as he followed her outside.

"I wish," she said, speaking over her shoulder as Walter scrambled to catch up. "It's a cinch to pick a fight in a new town, but then folks catch on. Soon as they reckon you're looking for it, they ain't so game. Eventually you gotta start paying 'em, or hanging out with sickos. Before long, you move on. You move on long enough, and you're going in circles, know what I mean?" She stopped at the alley and peered down it, squinting at the darkness like it had done something wrong.

"This the last place you saw her?"

"At the far end," Walter said, pointing down the crack between the two buildings. "Sshe ran around the corner like sshe wass chassing you."

Cat looked down the street at the front of the elections office,

then back down the alley. “You don’t reckon she went back to the ship, do you?”

Walter shook his head. “No way. There’ss bad people on the sship and we’ve been trying to find you for agess.” Walter felt for the Wadi, made sure it was still there. “I heard sscreaming when I came around the corner. Thought it came from one of the doorss. I banged on both, and a guy told me to get losst.”

“From that building?” Cat asked.

“No, from the bar. Nobody ansswered from there.” He nodded at the other place.

“Let’s go ask,” Cat said, marching toward the entrance of the place. “I know one of the guys that works here. Throws a helluva right cross.”

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“Paulie! Somebody here to see you.”

Molly watched the man leaning over her look up to the far end of the room.

“Tell ’em I’m busy,” the guy said.

“It’s that Callite chick from the bar. She looks pretty rough, man.”

“Aw, hell.” The guy left the second bag to fill and took off his apron; he casually tossed it across Molly’s chest as if she were a part of the furniture. “I got no time for her bullshit tonight,” he grumbled.

Molly tried to ignore the commotion and concentrate on her pulse —on the long, steady breaths she pulled in through her nose. She turned her head to the side and relaxed her muscles, no longer fighting against the restraints. The other guy, the one who had held her legs, was filling close to his tenth bag. The person giving the blood had stopped thrashing a while ago, their moans slowly drifting off as if to sleep.

Molly’s procedure was definitely going slower. She tried to make each breath, each slow filling and exhalation as gradual as possible. She pretended the tangy metallic taste in her mouth was her own precious blood reentering her body, filling her back up. The illusion was enough to keep her from gagging, allowing her to slow her metabolism down to a crawl.

She was going to go out on her own terms, she decided. Not thrashing and speeding the inevitable up, but going with a calm and peaceful mind.

It’ll be a bonus if it irks these bastards, she thought to herself.

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Walter picked up one of the election brochures and studied it while he and Cat waited. “Wasste of time,” he hissed to himself. He knew Molly better than anyone. Anyone still alive, anyway. Why would she come to a place like this? She *hated* voting.

The Wadi twisted and struggled inside his flightsuit, which made him suddenly annoyed at Molly for running off and leaving him with the stupid animal. You weren’t supposed to catch the creatures; you were supposed to *kill* them. Any real Drenard knows that. Besides, the thing had been eating so much food over the past weeks, it was beginning to cut into the money he’d bartered for back in Darrin. Hell, it had already eaten the money he’d made that day—and literally!

Walter put the brochure down and popped the thing on the head once more. The stupid thing had become like another crewmember, someone else Molly spent more time with than him. He thought about bopping it again when a large man in a jumpsuit came out of the back, wiping his hands on his butt. He smiled at Cat.

“Hey, Cripple. Looks like you’ve been having a good time tonight.”

“Yeah. Not bad, Paulie. Look, I was wondering—”

“Listen, we’re not really open right now, and I’m pretty busy in the back, so why don’t I come over and find you later? I’d be up for cracking some ribs if you’re buying.”

Walter watched a smile creep across Cat’s mouth—a mouth that didn’t seem near as busted up as it had earlier.

“Actually, I’m trying to help my friend here find someone. A young girl. You seen anyone stop in?”

“Not a soul. Been real quiet tonight. Big rally over on the square and all. Tell you what, I’ll keep an eye out and find you at the bar if I hear anything, okay?” He smiled at Cat, but his eyes darted over to Walter.

“Yeah,” Cat said. “Sounds good. Come by later.”

Paulie gave a half-wave and backed through the door, pushing it open with his elbows. Cat turned to Walter. She squatted down to be on his level while the men behind the counter continued with their work of moving heavy boxes, ticking items on clipboards, and eyeing the duo warily.

“Maybe we should head back to that ship of yours,” Cat said to Walter.

He shook his head and sniffed the air.

“No? Whatcha thinking?”

“He’ss lying,” Walter hissed quietly.

Cat jerked her thumb at the door behind the counter. “Paulie?”

Walter nodded. “It issn’t a guesss,” he said.

Cat touched her nose. “The Palan thing?”

He nodded again. “It reekss in here,” he said.

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“Hey, Paulie, what did she want?”

The far worker’s voice throbbed in Molly’s ears, mere background noise to her calm meditations. It was like falling asleep in the cockpit and feeling the thrum of the engines coursing up through the hull. More than that, actually. More like being in the vacuum of space and sensing vibrations through her fingertips. Her fingertips were tingling.

Molly couldn’t tell how much of her detached feeling was from blood-loss, how much from fear, and how much from the meditation. Her world had become a feeble set of inputs—dull and jumbled in her fuzzy thinking. She heard the other guy say something and a third voice tell them to get back to work. All of it took place far away, seemingly heard by someone else’s ears.

The large man appeared beside her once again. He dragged his apron off her chest and draping it around his neck. He fumbled with the sash, wrapping it around his back as he glanced down at the second bag.

“What the flank?” he asked. With both hands, he traced the tube from the bag to her arm, obviously searching for kinks.

Molly smiled ever so slightly.

The man must’ve noticed the twitch at the corner of her lips. He reached down and grabbed her neck, bent over and brought his face close to hers. He started to say something through a toothy sneer, but there was a crash at the other end of the room.

The man looked up.

“What the *flank?”* he asked again, louder, this time.

Or maybe Molly just heard it more clearly as the carefully wrought fog began dissipating from her senses. She felt it in her temples again: her pulse. Betraying her.

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“Jesus,” Cat said, looking out across the room of bodies. They were spread across a grid of tables, the forms as still as the two men she’d dropped behind the counter. She saw the bags hanging from one of the gurneys, saw the insulated cooler below a table stamped “Votes,” and a sickening puzzle fell together. She felt like she’d wandered into the back of a morgue to find them churning out links of sausage.

A short, bald guy with a beard came running over, yelling something. Cat drove her fist into his trachea to shut him up. She felt a lot of meat give way under the blow, felt her knuckles impact the ridge of spine beyond that softness—and figured she'd gone a little hard on him.

The man collapsed in a quiet mound. He just folded up on himself and remained as he landed, strangely still. He weren't the sort of guy she usually tangled with. Part of her felt horrible for him. The other part wondered what it had felt like to get hit like that. Had it hurt? Or been done and over too quick?

Looking up, she saw two men more her likable size: brutes with lots of muscle and mean faces. Her favorite combo.

"Paulie? What the flank is going on here?" She turned around and made sure the door to the front was closed, saw the Palan kid rushing over to check the bald guy. "You goddamn *draining* people?" She walked across the room. The two guys formed up in the aisle, both wearing aprons splattered with brown smears of dried blood. Except for Paulie's. His looked awful fresh.

"Oh, hell, Cat, we're just making a living." He reached over and held the other guy back. "We can get you in on this if you want. Guarantee it pays more that the performin' arts. You could make enough to get yourself a *real* ass-whoopin'."

Cat scanned the room. There were at least a dozen bodies in there, most of them too pale to be alive. "Where's the girl?" she asked.

"Don't know nothing about any girl. Look, you've had a rough night. Why don't I give you enough coin for a few fights and you let us see to our friend over there."

"Why don't we just flank her up?" the other guy asked.

"Yeah," Cat said. "Why don't you boys just flank me up?"

Paulie laughed. "For free? C'mon, Cat, I like you and all, but you don't know what you're messing with here."

"Yeah," the other guy said. "This ain't some small racket. You're gonna get a world of hurt."

Cat smiled. "Promise?"

Paulie waved his partner down. "Seriously, Cat, you should take your little friend and get out of here. Pretend you never came. Besides, we ain't seen no girl tonight."

"He'ss lying," Walter said, arriving by her side.

Cat placed a hand on the boy's chest and pushed him back. "Trust me," she said. "I know."

She turned and faced the men and smoothly changed her stance, bringing her fists up and taking her hips off square. Small things, but enough to change the game and quick. It was like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Paulie's friend came fast. Fast and dumb. She'd never

seen him around any of the pubs, so he obviously didn't know what he was dealing with. Cat watched his feet as he ran, figured out where he'd be planting his foot just before he got to her and made sure her own foot was driving to where his knee would be.

It sounded like a thick branch snapping in two. The knee bent back the wrong way, and she barely moved in time to keep from getting wrapped up in his flying bulk. He landed with a thud and went to screaming holy hell, writhing on the ground, fumbling for his foot, but it was trapped beneath him, out of reach.

Cat watched the Palan kid go from silver to white, his eyes bulging at the sight of the man.

"Can you shut him?" Cat asked.

The boy nodded and ran back to the screaming figure, pulling something out of one of the pockets on his flightsuit. Cat turned back to face Paulie.

"Now you see why I never bring him out," he told her, smiling nervously and gesturing to the gurgling man behind her.

Cat took a few steps forward.

"Damn, Cat, *fine*. The girl is right there. Barely gotten started on her. Take her and go."

Cat shook her head slowly. "I don't think so, Paulie ol' buddy. I ain't had such a great night. Or not bad enough, anyway." She called back over her shoulder: "Hey little man, see to your friend over there."

The boy padded by, wiping something off on a bloody rag. He hopped up and down, looking on top of the tables for his friend.

Cat pointed, showing him which one, and then stepped closer to Paulie.

Close enough that he could hit her.

••••

Molly didn't understand what was going on. She saw one of the guys go down, tripped up by a Callite. One of the other victims? Had someone gotten loose? She shook her head, tried once more to spit the rag out, and then felt her pulse quicken, pumping out more blood.

She tried to find a balance between staying calm and getting free; her struggles would hasten the end, but her stillness would ensure it. Her moment of panicked indecision was interrupted by Walter, who appeared out of nowhere.

Molly moaned at the sight of him; she could feel tears streaking down the sides of her face. He ripped the tape free and pulled the foul rag out of her mouth, holding it with his fingertips like it was

something dead. Molly turned her head to the other side and spat, scraping her tongue against her teeth. She saw the other victim, the Callite, get hit in the face and go down.

"Hurry," she told Walter, who fumbled with the straps across her.

Walter peered over her at the fight in progress. He bit his lip in concentration and reached for one of the straps.

"Arms first," she said, as he went straight for her thighs.

He flicked the leather strap open and her arms came free. She worked on the one across her chest, then sat up to do her legs—and nearly blacked out.

She lay back down, remembering the needle. A dark cord of crimson trailed off her left arm, spiraling down to one of the bags hanging from the table. Molly gnashed her teeth together and fumbled with the little valve on the end of the needle. The device tugged against her flesh as she twisted the small, plastic handle; she could feel the metal needle move around inside her arm as she fumbled with it.

Walter got her feet free as she finally closed the valve. She pulled the hose away from the device and felt nauseas as it started dripping her blood from the bag to the floor. She looked away and toward the fracas—saw her kidnapper on top of the blood-splattered woman. Molly wanted to help, but she wasn't sure if she was even strong enough to stand. She swung her legs over the side and felt Walter's hands on her arm. He had some of the tape from her mouth and a clean rag. He held them out as if to make a bandage across the needle.

"Wait," she told him. She pulled the needle out with a grimace, then Walter pressed the cloth against the rising bubble of bright blood welling up from her arm. Molly looked over her shoulder, keeping an eye on the two fighters while Walter wrapped tape around the cloth. He, too, was keeping an eye on the one-sided action.

"That'ss wasssername," he told Molly.

"Who?" Molly glanced back at the woman, who was being pummeled into the ground. "You mean *Cat?"* she asked.

Walter nodded.

Molly jumped down from the table and her brain toyed with passing out; her knees jittered, and Walter steadied her. She glanced at the bags of blood, trying to figure out how much was in them and remember how much she'd started with. There were a dozen or so hanging from the table with only two full, so she had to be okay. Just *deciding* so gave her enough psychological strength to remain upright. She turned and sized up her predicament as the man in the apron continued to pound her mother's friend. Wet, slapping sounds accompanied each blow. The noise had the same effect as the taste of that foul rag—it nearly made Molly gag.

“See if you can open the back door,” she told Walter. He hurried off while Molly tried to figure out how she was going to get Cat out of there—if she was even alive. The man’s body obscured most of the Callite, but what she saw looked horrible. A small pool of the alien’s blue blood spread out from underneath her, and dotted trails of the stuff streaked away in wide arcs that matched the man’s blows. Molly checked the tables for a scalpel, or anything sharp, but there were only the extraction needles, some tubing, and a bunch of bags.

She grabbed a full bag of her own blood and one of the needles, formulating a plan as she crept up behind the large man. Her heart, so recently calmed to slow its draining, raced as she snuck closer. She cringed as another blow landed. She watched the man’s hand—clad in dripping blue—come back up, then plummet with another fleshy crack. Molly expected him to turn around and see her, to stop her. She fought the urge to run, which she knew would just make her pass out. She carefully re-opened the valve on the needle. When she got close enough, she didn’t hesitate. Forming a fist around the valve end, she swung her hand around the man’s shoulder and buried the needle in his neck.

The large man spun around, eyes wide, his bloody hands fumbling above his collar where jets of crimson stole away his pulse. Molly bit into the bag, tearing it open with her teeth. The man growled at her and reached out—

Molly crammed the spilling bag of fluids into his face, aiming for his eyes, shoving it hard before letting go. He pawed at himself, screaming, blood flying through blood, his head still level with her waist. Molly grabbed the back of his head, wrapped her fingers in his hair, and pulled down as she threw her knee up. She tried to drive her leg all the way to her palms.

There was a dull crunch. The man’s arms fell to his side and his body went still. Molly’s knee lanced out in pain. She wobbled from the exertion—fell down to her hands and knees and fought hard to not black out.

Nearby, Cat’s head rolled around, blood and gore making her look like something out of an alien horror vid. She gave Molly a nasty smile. Her teeth—the ones not missing—were covered in her own blue blood; her lips were torn in two, bifurcated like her tongue.

Cat tried to say something, and flecks of azure mist popped up into the air. Molly scurried to her side, trying to figure out which wound to tend to first and how she was going to get them out of that damned place before more people showed up. She glanced to the back of the room where Walter stood holding the door to the alley open. He waved one arm for her to hurry up.

Cat spoke again. Molly tried to tell the woman to save her energy,

but the Callite's hand came up and clutched her shirt, pulling her down with ferocious strength.

Molly turned to her; she saw a maniacal grin spread across the woman's pulped face, saw eyes vibrant with life meet her own.

Cat whispered something. Molly leaned in closer, turned her head, concentrated on committing to memory the woman's words, in case they were her last.

"I felt that," the woman whispered. She let go of Molly's shirt and smiled even broader. "I felt that *good*."

26

In his snowy grave, Cole had a dream.

A final dream, perhaps.

A sequence of dreams.

He floated in space as stars rushed by, white streaks against the black. He saw his face reflected in a helmet. Molly's helmet? He saw his own visage fishbowled in another's visor, his lips black.

The persistent burn. His flesh on fire, a popping fire as the numbness receded, the cold draining away and exposing the agony beneath. Cole could feel his individual nerves stretched out across the cosmos, shuddering with dying sensations, electrocuting him with pain.

Dying. Lips black, reflected in a visor. Swollen or fishbowled or both.

He hung in the vacuum, surrounded by white.

Plucked. God's fingers holding him. Lifting him.

Dangling and dying amid the fuzzy white all around him and the shady blackness of his dreams within.

••••

Flickers of non-dream. The real invading his final sleep. Strings of meat, of tendon and vessels hanging from his arm. Hanging like wire. Wire and blood everywhere.

A twitch. A thrumming pain. A dream of aching, of burning and freezing, of thawing and cooking, of hell and heaven.

A universe of pain, full of aching.

An aching.

A never waking.

••••

Cole's life didn't flash by—it loomed and froze. A single image. A boy, dark-skinned and poor. White teeth, but no smile. Lisboa. Portugal. Bairro de lata. Slum. *Home*.

He saw fury creased across a young forehead, too young to crease like that. Black furrows full of the blackest rage. Fists clenched, arms thrown wide for balance. A boy at his feet, bent in half. The image was frozen, but the boy's leg was blurred. The boy's leg kicked, action without motion. A frozen blur, vivid and remembered. The last kick

that did it, pushing a nose back into a brain. Silencing it.

Cole didn't need to see it. Didn't need to see the before—the years of life abused and wasted. Didn't need to see the after—the hours of being beat on. So much pain on either side of that frozen slice of rage. Towering stacks of pain squeezing a sliver of time, that frozen horror of violence. Of *killing*.

Cole didn't need to see it. He had another life worth flashing by. A life of redemption. Of learning to love. But he didn't get that one. Just got the brutality and error—looming and frozen.

••••

Something else. New. Guilt and pleasure intertwined and swirling through Cole's mind, becoming one.

Arms waving, reaching, swimming out of the fog. Out of unconsciousness. The world, a world solidifying, congealing into the half-real, half-imagined.

A woman kissing him, her hands on his body, on his chest.

Lips touching, over and over.

Cole looked up—saw it wasn't Molly.

Red hair. Bright. The color and flicker of fire, of precious warmth. It danced and waved all around him—it draped across his bare chest. He was naked, the girl hovering.

It felt like—

It felt like forever.

Like wholeness and emptiness, like something spilling out and refilling, like infinite desire and eternal sating, the two racing and endless, like lines stretched out through the unknown, meeting at forever.

Pleasure.

Lust laced with fear and shame.

It wasn't Molly.

He tried to fight back, to push her off, but every movement—deflected. Every effort—turned against him. The fiery woman. Resistance became passion.

The gradual giving in. His body worn down. Exhausted. Dead. She was kissing him—he kissed back. Hands wrapped in the wild hair, pulling her down.

Skin sparked with electricity everywhere it touched, where it touched other skin. Something jolted him alive.

Alive.

Cole looked at his hands. Fiery hair slid between his fingers. Ten fingers. But he didn't have two hands. Not anymore. A dream. It was a

dream—the last firings of frozen neurons as he perished in a bank of snow.

He pushed the girl away—or tried to.

She was strong. And the more he fought, the more beautiful she became, smothering him with a longing.

Cole groaned. He wondered if this would be the last he ever felt. A parting gift for a life too soon ended.

He longed for Molly.

The lips, full and fiery, shut out his moaning, clamped down on his mouth. Biting. He felt his body betray him, betray his promises and do another's bidding. Cole cried, tears streaming down his face. Tears that felt incredibly—powerfully—*real*.

Part XIV – Salvation

"To find oneself, you must first lose a piece."

~The Bern Seer~

27

Molly gripped the spigot with the palm of her hand to avoid using her damaged fingers. She gave the valve a turn, and water gurgled out of the hose, discolored at first, then running clear. She offered the stream to Cat, who knelt beside her.

Cat pushed the hose away. “You first.”

Molly held the stream against her lips and took in a mouthful of the cool water. She shook her head, swishing it around before spitting it out, trying to purge the taste of the rag. She ran more water over her lips and drank some down, enjoying the burn of the frigid fluid. She passed the hose back to Cat, who began splashing some on her face.

Molly collapsed against the dumpster behind her and looked up at the lone and naked bulb above, which cast a sad pool of light into the alley. On the other side of the restaurant, she could hear the blare of horns and the rattle of traffic. Occasional shouts from drunks and angry pedestrians reminded her that *people* were out there. Civilization, going about its nighttime business. Oblivious. Meanwhile, she cowered against a dumpster in some dark alley, a seeming world away. Her body was literally drained, and she felt lucky to be alive.

“We need to get you to a hospital,” Molly said. She turned to the side and watched Walter pace up and down in the darkness, hissing to himself. “And then I need to alert the authorities, tell them what’s going on in that place.”

Cat swished some water in her mouth, then spit it out in a pale, blue stream. She wiped her chin with one of the few clean patches of her shirt. “Those probably *were* the authorities,” she said.

“They were going to kill me, weren’t they?” Molly inspected the mark in her arm, wondering how many times that needle had been used. Her vein seemed red and irritated, standing out against her pale skin. She worried she was imagining things. She looked up at Cat. “They’re rigging the elections, right? They were gonna take it all—every ounce I had, weren’t they?”

Cat nodded and splashed some water on her face. She looked up at Molly. “Was at least six dead in there.”

“But why?” Molly didn’t get it. Living people gave blood forever. It was as dumb as a parasite killing its host. Didn’t politicians need to keep their constituents alive, at the very *least?* She started to say something to Cat about it, then saw her face as the water washed away the blood. Molly leaned forward from the dumpster and gaped at the Callite’s lips, touching her own. “Your face—!”

“Still bad?” Cat asked, smiling a little.

"No, I—your *lips*, I could've sworn—"

"I'm fine." Cat bent the hose to stop the flow and handed it out to Molly. "What about you? You need a doctor? They do anything 'sides bleed you?"

Molly drank some more water and shook her head. She ran the cool liquid over the pads of her fingers, numbing them a little. "No, I just… feel a little weak. I… I'd be dead if you hadn't come along."

"We!" Walter hissed from the darkness.

Cat and Molly smiled at each other, complete strangers sharing a post-adrenaline moment where bonds were immediate and humor oddly enticing. Again, she marveled at how untouched Cat appeared. What had seemed a missing tooth must've been darkened by blood. And perhaps some of the blood on her belonged to another Callite—from a donor bag, or something. She watched as Cat reached down to adjust one of the strips of fabric around her thigh, bringing it up to hide a tattoo of some sort, a purple line that encircled her brown, scaly leg.

"So, I'm Molly," she said, holding out her hand. "Not quite how I'd hoped to meet you."

Cat wiped her own hand on the back of her shorts and held it out.

"Gently, if you don't mind," Molly said. After shaking, she held her palm up for Cat to see. "I'm what they call a frequent voter."

"Looks like you need a lesson on haggling, I'd say. Or at least on stocking up before an election." Cat smiled at her, looking her up and down before shaking her head. "You was just a baby when I saw you last. Hand couldn't wrap around my finger."

Molly froze, the column of cool water splashing from the hose to the dirt. "Do I *know* you?" she whispered.

"Naw. Just saw you the once, after you was born."

There was a sound down the alley, a banging and rattling noise like the lid of a garbage can falling. Cat leaned out and looked around the dumpster while Walter hissed with alarm.

"Probably a night glyph, but we should keep trucking. Can you walk? Them two boys behind the counter won't be out forever, and I'm certain they'll come looking for us. Especially after how we left their friends."

Molly nodded and let Cat help her up. "Do you have a place nearby?" she asked Cat. "My ship might not be safe."

"No. No place. No need, really." She frowned at Molly. "Look, I knew your dad, and for him I'm glad to help you out. But once I get you tucked away someplace, I have a few things I wanna look into. Starting with that election joint."

"Of course," Molly said. "And I'll—"

Cat raised her hand. "All I'm sayin' is that I don't have time for

helping you track down your past, if that's why you came hunting for me—"

"No, that's not why—"

"There's a lot I'd rather forget than stir up, is what I mean. And if the galaxy's endin' soon, you're not gonna get a lotta complaints from me."

Molly shook her head. "It's not like that. I just need help getting in touch with a group of people. My mom said you'd know where to start, maybe introduce me."

Walter popped out of the shadows, tugging on Molly and Cat. "Let'ss go," he hissed, looking down the alley.

Cat nodded and pointed the way, causing Walter to scurry off into the shadows. Molly watched him go, marveling at how at-home he seemed in the dark, grimy alley. Cat pulled her along, her gait light and full of bounce, especially for someone who had just taken such a brutal beating. Molly racked her memory for information on Callites, whether they healed faster than Humans. She was pretty sure they didn't.

"Wait a second," Molly said, pulling Cat to a stop. "Exactly what *are* you?"

Cat laughed. "What *am* I? If I wasn't what I seemed, would I *tell* you?"

"I don't know," Molly said. "It's just… I've seen some things lately that didn't turn out how I'd hoped. Men that weren't really men—"

Cat took a step closer. "Listen, you need to up and run if you suspect shit like that. Don't stand around gabbing—"

"Are you with the Bern?" Molly took a step back as soon as she heard herself utter the question. She looked around for Walter, her thoughts flitting to the last humanoid she'd encountered with godly powers and an uncanny resemblance to what he *wasn't*.

Cat moved swiftly and seized Molly by the shoulders. "Are you trying to get yourself *killed?*"

Molly attempted to pull away, but the woman's vice-like grip held her firm and seemed to confirm what she was thinking—

"No, I'm not one of them," Cat said. She let go and slapped Molly on the shoulder. "Now, c'mon. Walk and talk."

Molly hesitated, rubbing her shoulder. Something rattled in the alley behind her, and she found herself hurrying forward, catching up with the mysterious woman.

"What are you, then?"

"What does it look like?" Cat peered over at her. "I'm a sodden Callite, that's what. Well, *mostly*, I think."

"You think?"

"You were born on Lok, weren't you? How old were you when

your pops took off?"

"Six. And yeah, I was born here. Almost on the other side of the planet, though."

"Yeah, I know the place. Hell, maybe you were too young to remember, but Lok is a crazy place. There's shit in the water."

Molly looked over her shoulder at the receding pool of light by the dumpster. She spit to the side, the taste of the water from the hose already nasty with the hint of someone else's blood.

Cat laughed. "Little late for that. Besides, it takes a lot before something goes wrong. And the city probably treats their shit."

"You cuss an awful lot," Molly pointed out.

"Yeah, well I fell in with some Drenards and I've been to hyperspace. Kinda narrows the expletive vocab, you know? Gotta go with the archaic shh— *stuff*." Cat cupped her hands around her mouth. "Little man," she hissed. "Next left."

"You've been to *hyperspace*?" Molly felt her heart skip a beat; she hurried up beside Cat. "I—that's why I came to find you. I need to get there myself."

"What? Why'd you wanna go there? That place'll give you one helluva migraine."

Molly wasn't sure what her mom wanted her divulging, but she felt like she was already erring on the side of un-caution just by being *near* the alien.

"My dad's there," she said. "Maybe a friend of mine as well."

"Mortimor? What in the galaxy's *he* doing there? Thought he slunk back to Earth years ago."

Molly shook her head. "I don't know." She followed as Cat turned down another side-alley. "I've been told we need some special fuel."

Cat laughed. "Yeah. That, and a hyperdrive that don't exist. Speaking of which, you wanted to know what was in the water?"

"I have the hyperdrive, I think."

"What?" Cat pulled Molly to a stop, right in the middle of the narrow side-alley. Molly looked to the side and saw Walter's diminutive silhouette framed by another well-lit and busy street.

"You have *the* hyperdrive?"

"*The* hyperdrive?" Molly repeated. "I don't even know what that means. But according to this Byrne guy, I think I opened the hole above Palan that my mom escaped from."

"Your *mom*? Parsona? Ain't she a little… *dead?"*

"The ship," Molly said, realizing it would be easier to introduce them than explain it.

"Oh, *that* Parsona." Cat gave her a brief, concerned glance, as if she were thinking it's not healthy to anthropomorphize ships to such a degree. Instead of saying anything, however, she simply turned and

gazed down the dark alley for a moment. “Well, if you say you opened a door like that, then you must have the drive.” She laughed to herself, shaking her head. “Damn, that’s a clever place to put it. Ryke must’ve rebuilt it though, or someone would’ve noticed.”

Molly froze. She had a flashback to the smelly guy in her ship pointing out something in the engine room to one of his Callite partners.

“Shit,” she said, tasting the old word, which mixed well with the after-taste of the foul rag. “I think we might have a problem.”

“What’s that?” Cat asked, following along as Molly hurried off toward Walter.

“The guys on my ship,” she said, “I think they know about the drive!”

She broke out into a trot, her head balanced on the knife edge of worry and woozy.

Cat came running up alongside her—the alien’s strides easy and effortless. “These guys you keep mentioning,” she said, “they didn’t happen to smell like raw death by any chance, did they?”

28

Edison grunted and stood up from another of the Bern computers. “Complete data destruction,” he said. “I hypothesize demagnetization.”

Anlyn frowned and stepped close to the control station’s carboglass window. Looking out, she could see their borrowed Bern ship locked to the end of the long coupling corridor. After the first few computers were found perfectly clean, she had assumed they all would be. Edison, bless him, thought the sampling size was “statistically insignificant,” and had insisted they check several more.

“Are you satisfied?” she asked, smiling at his reflection in the glass.

“They scuttled their endeavor completely,” he said.

Anlyn nodded. “Which still leaves us wondering if they gave up or just changed tactics.”

“I disagree.”

Anlyn turned to give him her full attention. Edison spoke while removing the battery and power inverter he’d been using to temporarily juice up the computers. “The Bern abstained from fleeing this structure in haste, nor did they sulk off in defeat. They methodically scrubbed everything.” Edison aimed a claw at a patch of the rubberized decking. “Impressions there and there indicate removed equipment containing much mass. Equipment repurposed elsewhere.”

“Yeah, but *where?* And why leave this place unguarded?”

Edison gestured beyond Anlyn. “Visualize. These structures are devoid of defenses. No impediments to movement, no blockades, all open vectors of sight, all engineered for offense, a launching pad for unbridled attack.”

Anlyn frowned. “With no worry of reprisal?” she asked.

Edison shook his head. “Without Drenardian fear,” he said. “More parallel to a Glemot’s clinical precision. You must cogitate as a Bern.”

Anlyn gazed back out the window, imagining the way she would set things up if she were expecting an attack. Edison was right. *Her* side of the rift was purely defensive, and she couldn’t help but think that way. For generations, her people had held the lines, learning how to build trenches that never budged. *This* side was all seek-and-destroy.

“It still doesn’t make sense to leave in such a hurry,” she said. “You think they just jumped into a star because it gave them a way around our barrier? Then why didn’t we hear about them from Bishar? Surely if an invasion had begun he’d have been notified by the

Circle."

"You've stated the exact quandary I've been pondering."

Edison came over and rested a hand on Anlyn's shoulder. "What becomes of interstellar craft that hyperjump into preexisting mass?"

Anlyn shrugged and lifted her empty hands, palm up. "They disappear?"

"Precisely, but to what location?"

"Nobody knows—they never come back."

"Include this variable: assume the Bern determined a reliable method for returning."

"Returning from where?"

"Hyperspace."

Anlyn frowned. "Hyperspace isn't a *place*, though, is it? It's just a made-up name. An idea."

"That is one possibility, statistically likely, perhaps. However, *something* interconnects point A to all possible point C's. Travel requires existence. Movement must be analog, not digital. Objects occupy all states between."

Anlyn scrunched up her face, trying to follow along. "The point B's, you mean?"

"Correct. It's not theoretically impossible that myriad such points constitute a physical place hyperjumpers travel *through*. If that supposition is correct, one logical conclusion could also explain—"

"What happens to bad navigators," Anlyn finished for him. "So, if you accidentally jump into another object, you get *inside* hyperspace and you can't come out. Like something is blocking your way."

"Theoretically," Edison said.

"Okay, so you're stuck somewhere. Won't your oxygen run out?"

"Probably. Perhaps hyperspace consists of a junkyard of failed navigational attempts, derelict ships drifting throughout a large void similar to the vacuum of space but without the stars. Survivors could temporarily resort to looting, taking by force oxygen and spares from recent arrivals—"

Anlyn laughed. "Is this a real theory, or an idea for a holovid? Sounds to me like wishful thinking on your part."

"Incorrect. I'm being scientifically rational—"

"I can totally see you as a hyperspace pirate," Anlyn said, squeezing his arm. "You'd be ferocious, and have the best ship with all these spare parts cobbled together. And a peg-leg!"

Edison flashed his teeth. "Humorous visual, but I am being unbiased and logical. Dwell on the theory and compare it to our observations. The Bern deduced something new about hyperspace, found a primal door that opens all others. Is that not what hyperspace is?"

“Nobody knows what hyperspace is,” Anlyn said.

“We know some. We know one can travel extreme distances through-out our galaxy. If it connects all *that* space, it logically follows it could connect even more. Perhaps we heard nothing of an invasion because the Bern are preparing their attack from *within* hyperspace. Perhaps they’re building structures similar to this one. Perhaps, when they attack, it’ll be from every possible vector at once—”

Edison’s eyes flashed, his fur bristling with all the signs Anlyn had come to recognize as him having an idea.

“That explains the most confounding variable! They do not calculate it necessary to be *here* because they can return at any time of their choosing. Instantaneously. Setting up in hyperspace is synonymous with setting up *everywhere*. They *are* here, by all practical military measures. More crucially, their raid could target Bishar and the Great Rift from hyperspace with less effort than from these obsolete stations. Perhaps—”

“These are a lot of ‘perhaps,’ coming from you.”

“Perhaps,” Edison said, smiling. “And perhaps we should forget the prophecy and our previously stated mission of peace. Transmitting word back to the Circle becomes direr, or ascertaining the Bern fleet’s location and effecting an ambush before they diverge along too many vectors to defend.”

“I don’t know,” Anlyn said. She looked out the glass, mulling it over. In the distance, the armored wall of the Great Rift could be seen, the gold glimmering like a nearby star. It felt strange to *see* an object residing in her own galaxy while her home was so impossibly distant and inaccessible.

She looked at the foreign design of the ship they had become stranded in. Massive and black, with menacing barrels and rocket pods, its fearsome demeanor hid its toothless condition. She looked down the hull at the strange squiggles adorning it.

“What’s its name?” she asked Edison.

“Increase specificity.”

“The ship,” she said, pointing. “What’s it called?”

Edison gazed out with her. “The *Exponent*,” he said.

“The *Exponent*,” she repeated. “How coincidental is that?”

“I believe ‘ironical’ is the correct term. Exponent is a mathematical notation for enormous numbers, and we are but two. It also pertains to rapid growth, and barring advances in xenobiology, such is statistically unlikely for us.”

Anlyn smiled and shook her head. “That’s what I love about English. So many words have multiple meanings, the reader ends up injecting some of their own. Like the Bern Prophecy, for instance.”

Edison grunted. “That’s what I loathe about the language. English

can be imprecise when wielded improperly. It leads to conversational derailments such as this."

"I don't see a derailment—I see a detour. And where you see a mathematical notation, I see a deeper meaning, a coincidence that's hard to ignore." Anlyn turned and faced her love. "Exponent can also mean a person who brings forth a new or great idea. Like maybe the one you just had about hyperspace."

Edison frowned down at her. She leaned close and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head against his tunic. "I think we need to test your theory, and that scares me," she said.

Edison lightly stroked her back with his massive paws. They both looked to the side, out through the glass to the quiet cosmos beyond.

"I'm unable to deduce a reason for your frightened state," Edison said. He smiled at Anlyn's reflection. "Calculate the statistical likelihood of my incorrectness."

29

"Hello? Son, can you hear me?"

Cole cracked his eyes. There were no goggles, no bright, searing light from everywhere, just the soft warmth of artificial bulbs. Two men leaned over him. One of them he recognized but couldn't place. He had short hair and a generic-looking face. *Very* generic, like Cole had seen a hundred people who looked just like him.

The other man seemed slightly familiar as well. Cole blinked and attempted to bring them into focus. The second figure had wavy brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, both laced with gray. Cole felt he should know their names.

"Can you hear me?" the man with the beard asked.

Cole nodded.

He looked around and saw the same room from his last dream: beds and curtains and white walls.

"Can you move your arm?"

Cole watched the lips move, forming the words. It all seemed to be happening at a normal pace. Very un-dream-like. He smiled up at the men.

"Your arm, son, can you move it?"

Cole raised his left arm. He tried to make a fist, but it felt weak and tingly, like he'd been asleep a long time.

The generic-looking man smiled. "The other one," he said.

Cole continued to admire his own hand while the other arm came up. He lifted his head and stared at it in disbelief. It wasn't his. Flaps of skin hung open like fleshy shutters. Inside, small pistons, bundles of wiring, metal plates—they moved at his command. He traced the mechanics down past a hinged elbow until it met his own flesh, the two slightly different colors of dark skin adjoining in a neat line.

"Very good," someone said.

But it wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. Cole tried to sit up, but several hands forced him down. He tried to complain, but a mask was placed over his face. He took a deep breath to protect himself from whatever was about to happen. He looked up at the man holding the mask and tried to remember where he knew the guy.

Dakura! The guy was a Stanley! Cole gasped in disbelief—then he found himself hoping and praying that all his nightmares had been dreams, some simulated hell—

All he got for the sudden intake of air, however, was a heaping lungful of the stuff from the mask…

••••

He came to again, but in a different room. Sitting up, the various visions mixed together, confusing and piecemeal: his own face reflected in a visor, a boy he had murdered so many years ago, a girl with fiery red hair—

Cole looked down at the black bedsheets draped over him and the cot beneath. Glancing up, he saw an IV dripping fluids into his arm. Beyond, rows of elevated cots stretched down the narrow room, most of them full of still figures with their own IVs and breathing machines. Two doctors stood by one of the cots, obviously working on someone. Tools clattered on a tray; their heads remained bowed in concentration. One of them whispered commands to the other, calm but insistent.

Cole looked at the needle taped to his left arm. He turned and studied his right one. It appeared perfectly normal. He couldn't keep all the nightmares straight, couldn't sort out the real from the unreal. He hoped Riggs was part of the latter. It certainly hadn't *felt* real at the time. But then, some things he *knew* to be dreams had felt incredibly, indelibly real…

Hoping to sort the true from the fake, Cole tapped along his right arm with the pads of his fingers. He came across tendons, but they felt strange and unyielding. He felt the same part of his other arm, just to make sure. Completely different. Except that he could *sense* stuff through this other hand, could *feel* with the pads of the fingers as if they were real. He was pretty sure that sort of thing was still science fiction.

Cole pulled the sheets back and discovered he wore the barest of coverings: a surgical gown made of some thin material. He started to swing his legs off the cot to see if he could stand, when an alien groan emanated from the body next to him. Cole watched the bulky form stir slightly beneath its black sheets, then fall still.

When he looked back to the doctors, he saw one of them looking his way. It was a Stanley, there wasn't any doubt. He held up a gloved hand—blue latex dappled with blood—and said something to the other person, the doctor whose back was to Cole.

When she spun around, Cole recognized the hair immediately. It was mostly tucked away under the hood of the surgical gown, but bright, red trails of it hung down over the white, making the splattered blood on her gown seem pale and lifeless by comparison. The girl's eyes met his for a brief instant—then she dashed out of the room, leaving the Stanley to continue his work alone.

Cole grabbed his pillow and sat upright. He then became distracted by his arm, as it had done what he'd asked without him

having to think about it. He held it up again and flexed his fingers one at a time. The girl and another man strode into the room, both of them visible between his new digits.

It was the man with the beard. Cole tried to place his face as he crossed the room; the girl went right back to helping the Stanley.

"Where am I?" Cole asked, as the figure approached his bed.

The man ignored the question. He grabbed a stool from beside another cot and rolled it next to Cole's before sitting down.

Cole realized who he was, the sudden recognition hitting him like a bullet. He remembered seeing the man's face—a younger face—in pictures aboard *Parsona*.

"Mortimor?"

The man nodded. "It's Cole, right? You're the kid I spoke to over the D-band?" Mortimor glanced at Cole's new hand. "I'd offer to shake your hand, but let's wait until you get used to using it."

Cole pushed himself back on the cot, sitting up even more as he tried to clear his head. "You're Molly's—you're her *father*," he said.

Mortimor frowned. "I know you've been through a lot, but we've got some problems, and I need answers. Let's start with who you are and how you got here. Then I'd like to hear how you know Molly and where she is. Also, I need to know where that Drenardian band is you were thinking through the other day. I know it's a lot to dump on you, but we don't have a lot of time, if we have any."

Cole swiped his hair off his forehead and tried to swallow, but his mouth felt dry, his tongue swollen. "Can I get some water?" he asked.

"Penny!" Mortimor snapped his fingers. "Some water," he said, after she turned.

She rushed off, and Mortimor turned back to Cole. "Is Molly okay? How do you know her? And why were you wearing one of my flightsuits?"

"We found the ship," Cole said.

"Parsona?"

Cole nodded.

"How—?" Mortimor stared at the wall beyond Cole. "What about the man aboard the ship?"

Cole shook his head. "No one was aboard. But we did… we found what was *in* the ship. The *hidden* thing."

Mortimor narrowed his eyes, and Cole suddenly felt trapped in one of those situations where two people both know a secret, but don't know how to tell the other person they know without giving the secret away in case they don't.

"*Where* did you find it?" Mortimor asked, obviously feeling caught in the same snare.

Cole chose his words carefully: "In the chart data."

Mortimor nodded, but something else seemed to flash behind his eyes. Relief?

"Did you serve with Molly? You seem a bit young."

"We were cadets together. At the Academy." Cole looked up as the girl reentered the room. More of her hair had come loose as she hurried to the cot. She held a glass of water in her bare hands, her gloves pulled off. Cole felt a wave of guilty excitement from seeing her. He noted her freckles and the way her cheeks were flushed from the rapid walk. He barely managing to nod his thanks as he reached for the glass—

"Ah… *left* hand," Mortimor said, pointing.

Cole obeyed. He smiled at the girl, who turned away quickly, hurrying back to Stanley. Cole took a long swig from the glass, dribbling some down his chin. He went to wipe it off his mouth with his right hand, but Mortimor grabbed his wrist.

"Careful," he said. "People tend to hurt themselves at first, even with the temporary limiters." He reached down and used part of Cole's sheet to dabble at the moisture on his chin. The way he did it—like a doctor tending to a patient—suddenly made Cole feel like a useless invalid.

"You'll need some therapy," Mortimor said. "Some training. First, though, back to Molly…"

"Yeah." Cole took another sip of water and swallowed. "We were flight partners in the Academy. I was sent with her to get the ship. Everything went to hell from the beginning—"

"Byrne?" Mortimor asked.

"What? No, that came after. Hell, I just found out about him. You do know he's *here*, right?"

Mortimor nodded.

"Okay, no, our problems started on Palan, some pirates there—"

"*Palan*? What in the galaxy were you doing on Palan?"

"That's—that's where the ship was. I don't know what—"

"No, that's fine." Mortimor shook his head. He looked back to the Stanley, who was peering over his patient at their conversation. "So, I imagine Parsona told you what needed doing. Where did things go wrong? On Dakura? Lok? Is Molly okay?"

"Go wrong?"

Cole looked for some place to set the glass, then gave up. "Things went wrong everywhere." He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "We barely got out of Palan alive, we committed *genocide* on our way back to Earth, the Navy framed me and we had to kill Lucin —"

"What?" Mortimor pushed away from Cole's cot, a wary eye on his right arm. "Two guards!" he shouted to Stanley. Several of the

nearby forms stirred from the outburst.

Cole held up both hands. “No, that—it wasn’t like that. He was about to shoot Molly, I swear. He’s the guy who set us up, who had us go get your ship.”

Mortimor squinted at Cole. Two aliens ran into the room dressed in Navy black, reaching for weapons at their sides. Mortimor held up his hand, keeping them at bay.

“How did you end up here?”

“I don’t know. Molly and I split up on our way to Lok. I made a jump. I was in a Firehawk with a friend—”

Cole stopped, whatever words he had queued up next shattered in a spasm of anguish. He thought of Riggs, dead by his own hands.

It had been real. That part had been very, very real.

He leaned forward, rested his face into both palms, and began to cry. There was no escaping into his skull this time—no shrinking down and getting away from it. There was nobody to hurt, to take it out on. There was just the shame and the depression, the guilt and the torment, wrapping their tentacles around him, squeezing the air out of his chest.

“Leave us,” he heard Mortimor say.

Cole tried to remember where he was, to get a grip on himself, but the scramble for sanity just made him fall even faster. He sobbed into his hands, the tears dripping through his fingers.

“My friend—” he croaked, his voice high and embarrassing.

Mortimor came to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. “Take your time,” he said.

“My friend’s legs,” Cole sobbed.

“Shhhh. I know. It’s okay, son.”

Cole shook his head and swallowed. He licked the salt from his lips. “It’s not okay,” he mumbled. “Nothing’s okay. Molly—” He pushed his hands up through his hair, clenching fistfuls until the roots tingled with pain.

“Where is she?” Mortimor whispered.

The question hung in the air between them, between two strangers. They knew almost nothing of each other, but they both orbited that same drifting unknown, that haunting absence in both their lives. For Cole, the question opened some internal hatch holding back all his atmosphere, and the vacuum sucked at it. His body quaked with grief as a moan unlike any he’d ever uttered welled up and out.

Mortimor wrapped his arms around Cole and pulled his head to his shoulder. Cole latched on and cried even harder, a thousand horrible things dragging their claws across his insides as they were yanked through that newly opened hatch. He cried and fought it,

trying to keep them in. Shame and guilt, they tore through him, far more powerful than the embarrassment of breaking down in front of a stranger.

••••

Mortimor waited. Despite his sense of urgency, he let the lad have it out. He could very well imagine the things the boy had been through. While the young man's frame shuddered with agony, he looked around the room protectively. He looked to the others in their cots, to their heads lifting from pillows, their faces full of empathy and regret. Mortimor clenched his jaw and didn't say a word—he just let the boy have his cry.

It was all he could do to not join in.

30

“Did they smell like raw death?” Molly repeated. “They smelled *worse* than that!”

She hurried alongside Cat, wondering what the Callite knew about the people on her ship. And worried about what *they* might know about the mysterious hyperdrive within it.

The two of them left the dark alley and crossed the main road leading out of town. They angled toward the stables, cutting between two more buildings and running past Walter, who had become distracted in front of an electronics boutique. Finally, they darted into another alley to get out of the glow of the streetlights, the blood on them both conspicuous. They jogged along the side road parallel to the bustling strip Molly had walked down earlier that day.

“Are they—will they steal my ship?” she asked Cat, panting between the words.

“Depends.”

“They said they knew my father, does that narrow things down?” Molly glanced back and urged Walter along. Then something occurred to her—and she felt like she was going to throw up. Reaching up to her neck, she felt the empty air there, and had a sensation like she was missing some part of herself.

“The Wadi!” She stopped and yelled back to Walter, who jogged up to join them, panting. “Where is she?”

Walter’s eyes widened. He reached down and unzipped something on his flightsuit, and her Wadi burst out amid a cloud of colorful confetti like a cannonball followed by fake, pixelated smoke. It leapt to the ground and ran to Molly, scampering up to her neck and sticking its head down the back of her shirt. Molly’s heart nearly burst with relief. She kept one hand on its back and rubbed the stubble of Walter’s head.

“You’re the best,” she said, stooping over to kiss his forehead.

Behind her, Cat clapped her hands. “The ship?” she said.

Molly turned and nodded, and the three of them set off at a jog, the Wadi’s claws digging into her skin as it held on.

“The Callites are huge,” Molly warned Cat. “Bigger than the guy beating you up at that blood-letting place.”

“Won’t be a problem,” Cat said.

“*Lots* bigger,” she added, trying not to sound winded.

“Trust me,” Cat said, her voice even and smooth. “It won’t be a problem.”

They ran along in silence for a while, the buildings thinning as they reached the outskirts of town. Ahead, Molly could see the

beginnings of the stables. Most of the ships had their anchor lights on, red over white up the back of their tails or on extended rods for the ships that eschewed tails altogether. Molly berated herself for having not turned hers on; but then, she hadn't expected to be out all day.

"Where're you parked?" Cat asked.

"Other side of the johns." Molly pointed in the general direction, but didn't need to. They were downwind from them and could've nosed their way in the dark. "What's the plan?" she asked. "Should we get Pete for backup?"

Cat laughed. "He'd get in the way. The plan is for you to wait outside and for me to go in and handle it. I'll try not to get blood all inside your ship."

Molly wasn't sure what to make of that. They ran past a few ships, ducking under wings here and there to cut down the distance. She yelled back at Walter to watch a power cord snaking from one of the pedestals toward a ship, then heard him trip over it and bite the dust, anyway.

"The loading ramp was down when I left, but I don't— *there!"* Molly reached for Cat, trying to slow her up. "That's her right there."

Cat held up her hand. "I see her," she said. "Wait outside."

Molly nodded; she followed behind as Cat ran to the ship. She stopped just outside—close enough to hear what was going on. Walter caught up, dusting himself off as Cat disappeared up the boarding ramp. The two crewmembers crouched in the shadows, panting and looking at each other with wide eyes. The Wadi leaned over from Molly's shoulder and hissed at Walter, the first time she'd ever seen it do that.

"No," she whispered to the animal. She turned the other direction and peeked around the corner and into the cargo bay. She hated the idea of waiting and letting someone else take the risk alone; she felt on the verge of going in to investigate, when Cat came back down the ramp, her posture relaxed.

"Are they gone?" Molly asked.

Cat shook her head. "No, they're sleeping—"

"Good! Then we can take them by surprise. I can rig up a taser from the twenty-four volt panel, hit them with wires—"

Cat waved her off. "No doing," she said. "I know these guys."

"You *know* them?"

"Yeah," Cat said, nodding. "Old friends of mine. And they're exhausted, so why don't I introduce you in the morning?"

"*Introduce* me? I want them off my ship!"

Cat leaned her head to one side. "I doubt that," she said. "These are the people you've been wanting to meet."

••••

Molly woke up in the pilot's chair sideways, her feet over the control console. She had an awful crick in her neck and a Wadi *on* it—the creature was curled up under her chin and snoring contentedly. Dawn had come and gone, the sun fully up and heating the cockpit, giving her the headache she always suffered from rising late.

She moved the Wadi to the back of her seat before sitting up and rubbing her eyes. The first thing she noticed was that she was starving. Secondly, that the nav chair was empty. She leaned forward and turned on the cargo cam, then grabbed the helmet behind her. When the vid screen came up, she saw Walter pulling the galley apart to cook breakfast.

"Morning," she said into her helmet, greeting her mom.

"Morning, sweetheart. Are you feeling better?"

Molly adjusted the volume and pulled the visor shut to muffle her own voice.

"Yeah, sorry I couldn't talk more last night. I was on empty."

"Literally, from the sound of it. Sweetheart, before we do anything else, we need to look into this election place, find out who else has disappeared. This could—it could go back to one of the cases your father and I were working on."

"Really? What would the elections have to do with fusion fuel?"

"Nothing, but when your father and I were stationed here, our main investigation kept getting sidetracked by a never-ending string of missing persons cases."

"I remember you telling me that. Well, the *other* you. On Dakura." Molly paused, trying to remember *some* things and forget others. "Do you think I just avoided becoming one of those missing people?"

"I don't know. It wasn't an election year when we arrived, and yet some of the cases went back several years and were pretty steady. Maybe this is something different."

"Maybe they preserve the blood," Molly said. "They could steal it over time and then flood the polls with votes."

"That's what I don't understand about what they did to you. The tally machines don't work that way, otherwise donor banks would run dry every six years. The machines do skin conductance readings to make sure the voter is present, and they look for chemicals in the blood that have a very short shelf life, hormones and what-not."

"Well, the boxes in that place were marked 'Votes,' and Walter said the building was some kind of election joint."

"Which is how I would hide blood if I were stealing it," Parsona said.

"Stealing it for *what?"* Molly asked, exasperated. "Why do you

have to make everything more complicated?"

Her mom didn't reply, and Molly regretted the outburst. She looked down at the Wadi, who had crawled into her lap and was looking up at her, a pink tongue spiraling in the air between them.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," Molly said.

"It's okay. I probably deserve worse."

"No. You don't." Molly held the sides of her helmet and groaned. "This is just too much for me to handle, I think I… I need Cole, or somebody. Can we just go to hyperspace, find him and dad, just deal with all this other stuff later?"

"I think that's a good idea, actually. We'll talk about it after breakfast." The cargo cam panned up toward the crew quarters, drawing Molly's attention. "Walter's cooking is waking the ship."

Molly watched as two of the squatters emerged from their bunks. *Her* bunks, she corrected herself.

Molly flipped up her visor. "I'm gonna send Cat up here and have her put on Walter's helmet. I haven't told her about you, so break it however you like. Hopefully the two of you can figure out what to do next—I don't think I can handle being in charge of this."

"I need to talk to her anyway, find out how soon we can fill up with fusion fuel. Now, go drink plenty of juice, okay? I don't want you doing anything for the next few days besides resting up and recharging."

Molly mumbled a promise before popping off her helmet. She left it in the nav chair with the visor open and shooed the Wadi into what had become its favorite home. She crawled over the controls and exited the cockpit, entering a fog of tasty aromas.

"Good morning, guys." She nodded warily to the two men, then squeezed Walter on the shoulder as he tended a skillet layered with popping meat.

Scottie tipped a non-existent hat at her. "You must've come in late. Sure left in a flash." He crossed the cargo space toward the galley, and Molly saw he was wearing one of Cole's favorite t-shirts, his bulk stretching it near to bursting. The sight of it on him undid everything the smell of breakfast was attempting with her tastebuds. It also made it easy to forget that these were the people she needed to associate with.

"I'm Scottie," he said, holding out his hand toward Walter.

Walter shrugged and held up two cooking utensils, as if putting them down to shake would entail some exhausting ordeal. "Walter," he mumbled back, the sizzle of frying meat almost hiding the annoyed hiss that came after.

"This is Urg," Scottie said, patting the large Callite on the back. Molly recognized him as the near-mute from the day before. Nods

were exchanged. She marveled at how close the Callite came to filling one of Edison's flightsuits. Seeing these strangers in her crew's clothing sent ripples up and down her flesh. A full day of loathing these men had built up some sort of venom within her. Being told that these were the people she'd been looking for wasn't much of an antidote. She felt slightly nauseas from their presence—so much so, it took a while to notice their stench had disappeared.

"You guys figured the showers out?" she asked, rounding up mugs for everyone.

"Yeah," Scottie said. "I really appreciate you letting us shack up here and get cleaned up. We've had… some real troubles the past week or so."

"Well, you're more than welcome to stay for one more night, but we need to work out a different bunk arrangement. You guys can double-up or someone can sleep out here. Oh, and once we top up with fuel, we'll be moving on, so it's best you start looking for something more permanent."

Scottie glanced at Urg. They both accepted cups of instant coffee from Molly.

"Additives are in the fridge," she told them. "I'm gonna get Cat up, but your other friend can sleep as long as he likes." She headed across the cargo bay.

"Oh, Ryn's not in there. He left early this morning to… take care of some things. Should be back by noon."

Molly waved over her shoulder to let him know she'd heard, but continued to Walter's room. She keyed the door open and turned the lights on dim. Cat was sitting up in the bunk with her legs crossed, staring at the door.

"Morning," Molly said, wondering how long she'd been sitting like that.

"Morning. Everyone else up?"

"Yeah. Coffee's the instant kind. Breakfast'll be ready soon."

Cat popped up and stepped toward her. Her hair was wet, as if she'd recently showered. She had on the clothes Molly had set out for her. In the dim light, her face looked flawless, or unscathed at least, a very far cry from how Molly had first seen her. She also looked small in a plain shirt and shorts. Her wiry muscles seemed lean with their definition hidden. Molly wouldn't have given her a second glance in a crowd, even with the bright hair knotted back on her head.

"Hey," Molly said, "before you do anything else, I need you to go to the cockpit and talk to someone."

Cat lowered her brow to something between curious and wary. "Who?"

"There's a helmet on the starboard rack. Just put it on, the mic is

still live. And don't be alarmed if the door shuts behind you, okay?"

Cat narrowed her eyes but nodded. She headed toward the cockpit while Molly checked in on the other rooms to make sure everything was intact. The engine room, especially.

When she got back to the cargo bay, a plate piled high with meat and eggs was waiting on her. She grabbed a few pieces of bread and took one of the empty crewseats, pulling out the table in the handrest. Everyone else had already dove in, filling the room with contented, smacking sounds. Molly watched them eat, wondering why she felt so alone with so many people on the ship. She also marveled at how she could possibly feel anything other than ravenous.

She ate slowly, forcing everything down. She had to remember her promise to her mom and her pragmatic need for sustenance—her appetite simply wasn't there anymore. Walter set a glass of local juice on her tray. She took a sip, then touched her arm around the bandaid, wincing at the bruised and sore feeling that had spread from the needle. She couldn't tell if it had gotten worse overnight, or if it was getting better.

"You okay?" Scottie asked.

Molly glanced up. "Cat didn't say anything about last night?"

"Only that attendance was light and she didn't find many takers at the pub."

Molly watched him take another large bite and chew voraciously. Beside him, Urg continued to cut his food into tiny pieces and eat them with careful, steady precision, chewing subtly before swallowing. Molly wondered why Cat hadn't said anything about her ordeal—if it was a trust issue, or just a result of the late hour.

"What's she doing in the cockpit?" Scottie asked.

Molly shrugged. "I hope she's lining up a tank of fuel." She stabbed blindly at a bite of food and watched Scottie and Urg glance at one another. "You wouldn't know where I could find some, would you?"

Scottie took a bite of his toast and made a show of chewing, but he was obviously considering how best to answer.

"I might know someone," he said around a mouthful of masticated bread. He swallowed. "I have to warn you, though, the price has gone up considerably."

Molly looked over at Walter, who was following the conversation closely. "I can pay," she said.

"I'd be surprised. It's gone up a *lot*." Scottie smiled and jabbed his fork in her direction. "I think we could work something out, though. Barter with something besides cash."

Molly felt her throat constrict with disgust, even though she had no idea what he was talking about.

“Bartering goess through me,” Walter said, leaning forward from his seat.

Scottie looked from Molly to him, then back again. He raised his eyebrows and took a loud sip from his coffee.

“Give me a price before you tell me we can’t pay,” Molly said.

“The price,” he said, setting down his mug, “is the use of your ship for a few weeks.”

Molly slapped her fork to her plate, then grabbed her armrest and squeezed so tight, it felt like her hand would lock there forever. She found it difficult to unclench her jaw to reply, so she hissed through her teeth: “Never.”

Scottie smiled and held up his fists—a knife in one and a fork in the other. “It’d be for a good cause,” he said. “You’d be helping a lot of people out.”

“There are other people needing my help more. Tell you what, you give me a tank of fuel and I’ll come back in a week and you can ask my dad to use his ship.”

“I thought it was *your* ship,” said Scottie.

“*Our* ship. Same thing. Look—” Molly released the armrest and grabbed her napkin. She dabbed the corners of her mouth with it. “I’ve been traipsing across Lok for two weeks looking for some of this fuel. I don’t have time for—”

“For my people,” Urg said quietly.

Molly looked over to the Callite, his broken silence stunning her into one of her own.

“You haven’t been here when one of the shuttles goes up, have you?” Scottie asked.

Molly shook her head, but then she remembered the craft she and Walter had seen lift off from the café. “Did one go up yesterday?” she asked.

Scottie nodded.

“I saw it,” she said. “And you say it was a shuttle?”

“An immigrations shuttle. During election years, they round up Callites with expired work permits and ship them home.”

“But that’s the law, right?”

Scottie frowned. He reached over and rested a hand on Urg’s arm, even though the Callite didn’t seem to be making an effort to rise, or even speak.

“Things aren’t right or wrong because they’re the law. They’re supposed to be the law because they’re right or wrong.”

“Look,” Molly said. She pushed her eggs away from her toast, but her meager appetite had dwindled to nothing. “I don’t want to argue politics, or whatever. I’m not trying to be a crusader. I just want to get back to my family. Surely you can understand—”

“I do,” said Urg. “I understand.”

Molly glanced up and locked eyes with the massive Callite; she watched his lids scissor shut in a slow blink.

“I want my family back as well,” he said.

“Can’t you just go home to them?” Molly asked. “That’s all I’m trying to do, get back with my family.”

Urg shook his head.

“They were on yesterday’s shuttle,” Scottie said.

Molly looked back and forth between them. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she whispered. “Maybe it would be best if he just—”

“The shuttle was shot down by that fleet up there,” Scottie continued. “The last four shuttles have all been sent crashing straight back to Lok, no shots fired, nothing. They just go limp and fall back to the prairie. It’s like they get halfway to orbit and just give up.”

Molly looked from Scottie to Urg, disbelieving. “It *crashed?*”

“All of them have for the last two weeks.”

“With *people* on them?”

Scottie leaned forward slightly. “My two friends should’ve been on that last one. *With* their families.”

Molly looked down at her plate where she had idly swirled her food into a miserable mess.

“I didn’t know,” she said.

“They won’t stop,” Scottie said. “They’ll round up more today and more the day after, right up to the elections.”

“But why would they—?” Molly shook her head. Surely they wouldn’t. She dropped her fork and reached for the bandage around the crook of her arm, rubbing it reflexively. Looking down at the red skin spreading out from the puncture wound, she considered that they possibly would.

“It’s the same to them,” said Urg, as he shrugged his massive shoulders. “Gone is gone.”

Molly turned to him, saw the deep furrows in his scaly forehead that seemed to convey confusion rather than the sad resignation in his voice.

“Then why come here?” she asked. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I don’t mean to *blame* you, but why risk it?”

“The government on Shurye isn’t much better,” Scottie said, speaking for his friend. “There’s just as much of a chance taken by sitting still.”

“Everything is chance,” said Urg.

Something beeped. Molly looked over, thinking it was an alarm of some sort, then saw Walter had finished eating and had brought out his videogame.

“I feel bad for your loss,” she said, turning back to Urg. “Truly, I

do. I lost my family when I was younger, so I hope you can understand what it feels like to have a chance to get them back. Besides, I can't do anything about that fleet, and the law is probably not on your side—"

"Screw the law," spat Scottie. "This isn't about law or legality—"

Molly looked down at her plate and away from the outburst.

Scottie took a deep breath, calming himself.

"Think about what the law is saying," he said. "People born inside one invisible line are confined there. Even if they wanna pay the taxes, buy some land, obey the local rules, they aren't allowed to move. They don't have the basic freedom to choose where to live or where to raise their families. It's like the days of being born a cobbler's son and having to become a cobbler."

"There's legal immigration," Molly said, unable to restrain herself from arguing her point.

"And there's *limits* to that, which means after a certain number, we get right back to that invisible line a sentient being can't cross. This isn't about laws. It's about xenophobia. It's about Lokians scared their planet will be overrun, that its future makeup might be different than what it was in the past."

Molly shook her head. "I don't think that's the primary motivation—"

"No?" Scottie pushed his plate across the galley table and leaned back in his seat. "I think you're wrong. The same government restricting immigration from Shurye does everything it can to get more *Terrans* to move here. And I don't think you understand how much good you could do with this ship of yours."

Molly stood up and stacked her plate with Scottie's and Walter's. She scraped her leftovers in the degrader before piling the dishes in the sonic washer.

"You guys can stay here until you find a safe place," she said. "I'll pay you double the market value for the fuel, or I'll ask you to point me in another direction. I'll even let you use the ship when I get back, but I won't be delayed. I can't be." She looked over Walter's head to Urg, whose lids flicked together once, removing the wet sheen from his eyes.

"I just can't," she said.

Molly topped up her coffee and crossed the cargo bay to open the ramp and let in some fresh air. She leaned against the jamb with her second cup and peered through the steam as the metal decking swung out and into the dusty stable lot.

Outside, several crews from other ships performed their daily chores, making Molly feel like there was something productive *she* should be doing. They washed down their hulls, performed repairs out

on their wings, scrubbed bugs off the carboglass, all reminders of the tasks she'd been neglecting. The weather was great for the work, but she could tell it was going to get hot later in the day. And without a breeze, it wouldn't be long before those crews went scurrying back inside, hovering around the AC vents and waiting until nighttime to finish the day's work.

She blew on her coffee and was about to take a sip when she noticed a cluster of men crawl up on a wing a few ships to *Parsona's* rear. One of them held something to his head, a portable radio, perhaps. Everyone in the group looked back to the west, shielding their eyes from the sun.

Molly leaned out from the doorway and followed their gazes. She noticed several other captains and crewmembers exiting their ships to look the same direction.

"What's going on?" she asked a young man in coveralls, who was running between her ship and the neighbor's.

"A fleet," the guy yelled over his shoulder. "There's a massive new fleet on SADAR!"

Molly looked to the sky, her hand shading her eyes. She couldn't see anything, but she thought she heard a rumble growing, like distant thunder.

Scottie joined her by the ramp. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Something—" Molly cursed herself and ran back inside. She keyed open the cockpit and apologized to Cat. Leaning over the control console, she fired up the SADAR and waited for it to initialize.

"You okay?" Cat asked.

"I think there's something going on in orbit," Molly told her.

The SADAR popped up, and she extended the range. There was the cluster of the Bern fleet overhead, which hadn't changed much—just grown since she'd last looked. The largest of them dominated the group, the one she liked to think of as Lok's new potato-shaped moon.

"There!" Cat said, pointing.

"I see it," Molly said. A cluster of new targets were in motion, and more were streaming in behind—blips that signified ships popping out of hyperspace. And something about the formation triggered a tremor of recognition in Molly.

"Can your mom see this?" Cat asked. "Nevermind, she just said she could now that the SADAR is on."

"Yeah, that's how it works. I think I know what—"

Cat raised her hand as red warning lights flashed on SADAR. Molly reached to locate the threat, when Cat grabbed her wrist.

"You need to hear this," she said, pulling the helmet off.

Molly switched to the external radio and hit the "Center Target" button.

"—yday, mayday," the voice crackled. "Cruiser *Engala* has been hit by something. No flight controls. Gravity sensors are haywire. Mayday, mayday, ma—"

The radio fell silent. The SADAR centered on the cluster of new targets that had just jumped in-system, their IDs blinking as *Parsona's* computers scanned them. But Molly didn't need to wait for the computer to do its work. She knew the formation without needing the ships' IDs:

Navy.

The cavalry had arrived.

"We need to get into flightsuits and scramble," Molly said.

"We're no help up there," Cat said. "We need to hunker down."

Molly looked at the screen. The Bern ships were moving, responding to the Navy fleet. Only—they seemed to be moving *away* from them. Her normally tactical brain remained blank, not knowing what the Bern ships were capable of. It felt like the beginning of a surprise simulation, those tense moments when you weren't sure who you were up against. She reached for the dash and started warming the thrusters and cycling the hyperdrive, just in case.

"Why don't you grab some food?" she said to Cat. She fought to keep her voice calm as several of the red Navy targets began flashing with mayday beacons. It made no sense. The Bern ships seemed to be retreating, but the Navy fleet was winking with distress.

"I'm not that hungry," Cat said, "but I get your drift. Tell your mom we ain't done talking." She crawled out of the nav seat and handed the helmet to Molly before exiting the cockpit.

Molly put the helmet on its shelf and leaned over the nav seat to tap the top of her own. The Wadi came out with a sleepy look; she scooped it up and followed Cat into the cargo bay. "Walter, take the Wadi and make sure it eats plenty." She looked down the ramp as Walter pulled the hissing creature from her arms. "Scottie, I need you to come back inside. We're buttoning up."

"What about Ryn?" he asked.

"We'll let him in when he gets here, if we're still here when he gets back."

"*If* we're still here? We aren't going anywhere without—"

A loud blast cut him off, and Scottie fell forward as a wave of compressed air rocked the ship. Something exploded nearby. Molly ran to him, helping him up as a wall of dust and debris roared across the stables.

Molly's hair stirred from the breeze of concussed air. The incredible noise left her ears ringing, but she didn't see a fireball, didn't feel heat in the air from a munitions blast. She ran to the door, squinting into the storm of dust that had risen around the neighboring

hulls.

Another impact boomed farther away and was followed by the rumble of kinetic energy. Molly looked up—Firehawks and larger ships were raining down through the atmosphere, clear across the sky to the horizon. They dropped through the air with the glow of accidental reentry, leaving behind trails of dirty smoke.

“What the flank?” Scottie asked, peering out beside her. “Holy hell,” he said, “it’s like the shuttles—”

“Get inside,” Molly told him. “We need to get out of here.”

31

Cole stared up at the ceiling of his new room. He lay in a narrow bunk, the one beside him empty. He wondered if Mortimor's people had that much extra space, or if it had belonged to one of the aliens he'd seen die on the Luddite's moving village. Maybe it had belonged to someone who had perished during that raid, a raid he assumed was meant to rescue him.

He ran bits of that hellish scene over and over in his head; he thought back to the conversation with Byrne and tried his best to remember everything he had spoken of. He puzzled over the strange way time seemed to alter around that mast. He recalled with a shudder the horror of fleeing across the deck, of being chased… he stopped himself before he got to what came next.

Cole rubbed his face. So much had happened over the past few days, so much information had passed through his ears, it made him feel like a cadet cramming for an exam even though they knew they didn't stand a chance. The clock beside his bunk went off for the third time. Cole slapped its top and tried to fight off the depression. He'd lain around recuperating for half a day, and now he was late for his orientation and rehab. Begrudgingly, he tore off his sheet and swung his feet off the cot. He reached for the outfit they'd left folded on the stool: a faded pair of civilian denims and a t-shirt with a logo for some unknown sports team. He was thankful to not be donning Navy Blacks, which most of people he'd seen seemed to be wearing. He also hoped they had burned whatever remained of his flightsuit—he didn't want to see the stains in them ever again.

Dropping the surgical gown, Cole stepped into the faded pants and pulled them up. For a bit of practice, he used his right hand to work the zipper. He didn't understand what Mortimor had meant by rehab—the thing worked perfectly well, just like a real hand. The zipper slid up smoothly, the hand firm and steady—and then it kept on coming, the metal tab ripping off with a soft click.

Cole held up the broken piece to inspect it. In the shiny, neatly sheared ends of the snapped metal, he got his first glimpse of what Mortimor had meant.

"They're waiting on you."

Cole snapped his head up just in time to see a flash of red hair swirling through the air, following the speaker out through the door. Her voice rang in his ears, burning his cheeks. He shook his head and cursed at himself, then closed his eyes and pictured Molly.

With red hair.

"Aw, c'mon!" he said, clasping both hands to his face in

frustration.

And regretting it immediately.

••••

When Cole left the room, he saw Mortimor and the Stanley conferring at the end of the hall; he hurried down to meet them.

"What did you do to your face?" Mortimor asked, his eyes wide.

Cole touched his bruised cheek, using the only hand he trusted at the moment. "I was practicing what I'm gonna do to the guy who took my arm," he said.

"Oh, boy," the Stanley said, smiling. "Another hothead."

Cole returned the robot's smirk, then noticed something strange about the Stanley. The skin around the mouth was perfectly natural, not folded and plastic-looking. Cole's hand fell to own lip, his jaw dropping.

"We haven't been formally introduced," the man said. "I'm Arthur. Arthur Dakura."

"You're not a Stanley," Cole said.

Arthur laughed. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Well, not really. I guess you could say they're *me*. I modeled them after me, anyway."

Mortimor grinned and slapped Arthur on the back. "C'mon, let's walk. You boys can chat on the way."

He pulled Arthur along, and Cole hurried after them. At the end of the hallway, the trio turned a corner, and Cole got his first glimpse of the motley makeup of the place's inhabitants. Callites and Delphians and several races he'd never seen pictures of strolled in and out of connecting passageways. The place had the bustle of the Academy during a drill. Hallways, offices, classrooms, dormitories—each room they passed had a chaos of bodies stirring within. All manner of creature moved between the doorways, but only a smattering of Humans.

Cole tried not to flinch as a male Drenard rounded the corner wearing a white combat suit. The blue alien nodded to Mortimor, who greeted the massive alien in a different language. Cole held up a finger, like a student with a question. He watched the Drenard pass, his jaw hanging agape. Arthur tugged him along, asking a question before Cole could get his own out:

"I take it from your confusion of my identity that you've met my simulacrums. How long ago were you there?"

"Dakura?" Cole looked over his shoulder as the Drenard ducked into another doorway. "Um, a week? Or less, actually. I'm not sure, to tell the truth."

“Just a week?” Cole turned back to Arthur and saw the man’s eyes grow wide. Arthur rested a hand on Cole’s shoulder as they steered through traffic after Mortimor. “Tell me, how was the planet looking?”

“The planet? It was, uh, dark gray. Kinda boring, to be frank.”

“*Dark* gray? Excellent!” Arthur clapped his hands together. “Brilliant.”

“Yeah, real nice place you got there,” Cole said distractedly. He turned to watch a creature go by that seemed covered in plates of stone.

“Did you take a tour? Of LIFE, I mean?”

“Up close and personal,” Cole said, not caring to relate his run-in with security. He followed Mortimor through a door and into a stairwell; Cole held the door open for Arthur, who nodded politely like everything buzzing around them was perfectly natural.

“What’re you doing here?” Cole asked.

“Thank you,” Arthur said, shutting the door behind him. “Well, I wish I could say I was here on an important mission to save the galaxy, but I landed quite by accident. I was out training with my yacht—”

“You were showboating,” Mortimor called back. He had already begun to take the stairs two at a time.

Arthur smiled at Cole and winked. He rested a hand on Cole’s back and guided him up the stairs, talking as they went. “I was just having some fun in a time trial course, trying out some alterations to my own thruster design. I got in a spot and took a chance on jumping out. The rest is too long a story to relate.”

Cole shook his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean *you* specifically. What are *all you* people doing here? I don’t even recognize half the aliens back there.”

Arthur came up beside Cole, shaking his head. “The Luddites made this about race a while back. What you see here is just the fraction of the Underground that remains, and a lot of them are members from other galaxies. The majority of incoming are Human now, ever since the war in Darrin. Most of them are snagged by the Luddites before we can get to them. The Milky Way tends to dump out in the colds for whatever reason.”

“So this is where people disappear to?” Cole quickened his pace, trying to catch up with Mortimor. “Why can’t we just jump back out?”

The stairs ended on the next level, terminating at a single door. Mortimor had a tall locker open. He brought out sheets of plastic and what appeared to be goggles. “Doesn’t work that way,” Mortimor said. “Here, put these on.”

He handed Cole a clear poncho-like outfit and a pair of goggles.

Cole worked the plastic over his head while Arthur did the same and continued talking:

"Normally, the little critters can't see into hyperspace, what with the light and all. We've bred some that can, but they have the opposite problem: they can't see *out*. Well, metaphorically speaking. Supposedly it's two types of light, or the medium they vibrate in, but that's more of Ryke's bag, all I do is play doctor." He glanced at Cole's arm as Cole fumbled with his goggles. "Best I know how, anyway." He met Cole's gaze and frowned. "I'm sorry, you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? Of course you don't."

"Fusion fuel," Cole said. He strapped the goggles to his forehead and hoped he'd said it like it wasn't one of the most recent things he'd learned, trying to come across as cool and adult-like as the other two. He pulled the hood of the poncho over his head, trying to copy what they were doing and not seem completely lost. "So we're stuck here? Is that what you're telling me?"

"You ever met a guy in a bar with a lot of cool stories from hyperspace?" Arthur asked.

Cole shook his head, getting the point.

"Grab your neighbor," Mortimor said. He reached for Cole's elbow and lowered his goggles. Cole did the same, making his world completely black as he reached out for Arthur.

"Ready?"

"You betcha," Arthur said.

"Sure," Cole said, not knowing what to expect.

Mortimor cracked the door, letting in enough light to see clearly through the blackened spectacles. The three men stepped out onto a rooftop covered in water. Cole didn't feel the rain at first; they were sheltered by the small stairwell sticking out of the roof. Once he stepped out, however, he saw it to either side—drifting sideways, parallel to the ground, just like the snow.

"That's weird," he said, still clinging to Arthur and fighting the vertigo.

"Makes perfect sense once you get a handle on the physics. Light and water, my friend, the components of life—"

"I didn't bring you boys up here to discuss the weather," Mortimor said. He leaned close so they could hear him clearly over the patter of rain on the back of the stairwell. "Follow me."

Arthur shrugged at Cole and raised his eyebrows. The two of them turned and followed Mortimor around the stairwell and into the driving rain. Cole looked down at his feet as he walked so we wouldn't feel so dizzy. He noticed the top of the building was coated with a rubbery surface, probably put there to provide traction through the film of water in addition to keeping the rain out of the structure

beneath.

As they walked directly into the sideways torrent, the large drops of water popped up and down his chest, sounding much like the incessant gunfire of the Academy's rifle range. Cole kept his head low and marched with the others toward the edge of the flat, rectangular roof, the size and shape of which reminded him of boring office buildings.

As they neared the edge, however, Cole realized the place was far more interesting than that. The entire structure was *moving*. Or maybe the ground below was simply sliding by beneath them. Either way, as Cole stopped a meter from the edge and looked down, Mortimor and Arthur had to reach out and grab his elbows to steady him before the vertigo sent him reeling.

"Don't get too close," Mortimor warned. He and Arthur pulled Cole away from the edge.

Cole found it hard to turn away from the sight of the land rushing by. The world below was a field of mud covered by a skim coat of water—an infinite, brownish mirror. The lowest layers of rain skipped right across it, leaving furrows like waterfowl coming in for a landing. And all of it slid beneath the building, giving it the appearance of a dirty, rippled ocean viewed from the bow of a steaming ship. Cole's stomach began to protest all the myriad cues of motion that belied the solid footing beneath him.

"Best not to even look at it," Mortimor said.

Cole agreed. He turned away from the sight and put his back to the rain, huddling close to the other two men.

"Then why bring me up here?" he asked.

"So we won't be overheard," Mortimor said.

"What, like spies?"

Cole looked to Arthur, whose grin had been replaced with tight, flat lips. "Is he serious?"

"We have a few embedded within the Luddites—we're pretty sure they have some here. It's complicated, but a lot of soldiers have defected over the years. It's easy to forget why you're here after a while. Some people flip just to see if they'll be more comfortable on the other side."

"Or because they've grown *too* comfortable," Mortimor suggested. "Some just get bored."

"So why *are* you here?" Cole asked. "And what's up with this place? Is this building on wheels?" He concentrated on his feet, trying to sense any movement.

"Grav panels," Arthur said rather loudly to compete with the rain. "They cycle, pushing and pulling, smooth as a baby's—"

Mortimor waved him silent.

“Listen, son, there’s an invasion underway. A very nasty people —”

“The Bern.” Cole nodded. “They design the universe every time it goes around. I’m the Golden One. I got a lot of this from the armless dude.”

Mortimor’s eyes narrowed.

“Byrne. I told you he was here.”

“You didn’t tell me you *talked* to him,” Mortimor said.

“Well, I mostly listened.” Cole faced the far end of the roof, allowing the rain to smack the plastic across the back of his head. The men to either side of him did the same, the three of them standing in a line, their heads bent close to confer over the pattering drops.

“And he called you the *golden* one?”

“Or chosen, I can’t remember. Anyway, he said it was too late. Then a bunch of people came in, dressed in white—you guys, I take it —and everyone started getting hacked up—” Cole stopped.

“Yeah, that was some of our men,” Arthur said.

“I picked up a little of what Byrne was thinking,” Mortimor explained. “It was just coming through too damn slow to decipher easily. What part we got, well, no offense but I thought you were someone else.”

Cole glanced over at Mortimor. “Do what?”

“I picked up another name—” Mortimor looked across him to Arthur. “We thought Molly—”

“Yeah,” Cole said, “it sounded like Byrne was confused about something similar. And look, I’m sorry to disappoint, but I have no idea about any of this stuff. All I care about now is getting back to her. And maybe visiting that camp on the way and kicking some ass.” He held up his new arm, tenting the poncho in front of him. He clenched and unclenched a fist, visible through the clear plastic. “I’m ready to try out this new hand,” he said.

Mortimor shook his head. “Forget about it. We don’t go on raids for revenge. Besides, there’s an endless supply of idiots on both sides, there’s no changing anything by bashing against each other.” He gestured out to the moving, inundated world beyond. “The best we can hope for out here is to stay in one piece and in one place.”

“What kind of ship did you arrive in?” Arthur asked.

“Firehawk,” Cole said. He reached up to adjust his hood and keep the water from dripping in.

Arthur looked across at Mortimor, who shook his head.

“Why’d you guys bring me up here?” Cole asked, feeling like there was something they weren’t telling him.

“To ask you a favor,” Mortimor said. “But first, we need to know everything *you* know. Are you sure you never heard any news about

Lok?"

Cole shook his head. "Like I told you yesterday, we were heading there, but we got picked up by the Navy—"

"That's where the Firehawk came from?" Arthur asked.

"Yeah."

"Why'd the Navy pick you up?" Mortimor asked.

"We were leaving Dakura where we— Molly's mom, the one on the ship—"

He looked to Arthur for help, but got a blank look.

"We were told to unplug her mom—your wife, sir. I—I didn't want to, but… you should have seen—"

"And did you?"

Cole nodded.

"Good," Mortimor said. "I'm sorry you had to clean up one of my mistakes, but we wanted that done years ago. We all agreed."

Cole bobbed his head again, unsure of what to say.

"So, you never made it to Lok, and you don't know if Molly did."

Cole shook his head. "Do you think she's okay?"

"I don't know," Mortimor told him. "I'm worried about all of us, to be honest."

"So what's the plan?"

"For you? Some rehab with that new hand and some rest. What's done is done. But first, there's someone who's dying to meet you."

Cole looked out across the rooftop. The sideways rain made it feel like his feet were glued to a wall and the water was falling straight down. "Who would want to meet *me*?" he asked.

"I want you to listen and listen carefully, okay? This person's name isn't to be spoken where anyone can overhear."

"Who is it?"

"As far as anyone knows, she works more for the enemy than us, okay?"

Cole swallowed. "Who wants to see me?" he asked.

Arthur squeezed his shoulder and leaned in close.

"Have you ever heard of the Bern Seer?"

32

Parsona wasn't the only ship leaving the stables in a hurry, or Bekkie, for that matter. Dozens of craft lifted up from all around town as crewmembers ran across Pete's dirt lot in panic, trying to get back to their ships. Through the carboglass, Molly could hear improperly warmed thrusters screaming as neighboring starships lifted off cold. In the distance, a Navy cruiser fell through the atmosphere, glowing bright red—a sign of breached reentry panels. It disappeared over the horizon, followed by a flash of light.

"Why're they in atmo?" Cat asked. She leaned forward from the nav chair while Scottie hovered behind, his hands on the backs of their seats.

"I don't know," Molly admitted. "Maybe they were trying to land, or something."

"A *cruiser?"* Cat asked incredulously.

"They don't want debris," Scottie said. "That explains the shuttles."

Molly avoided the crush of departing traffic and flew low, skirting the prairie as she headed out of town. There weren't many more blips falling, but a few big ones were still in orbit.

"No debris?" Cat asked, turning to Scottie.

"For the rift. They're shooting them down intact."

"I think you're right," Molly said. "They're somehow disabling them and knocking them out of orbit. And they're making it look easy."

"Poor Ryn," Scottie said.

"I'm sure he's fine. Probably just as safe wherever he is."

Scottie didn't say anything. Behind them, Molly could hear Walter arguing with Urg about which dishes went where.

"Where should we go?" Molly asked. She looked at their current course and realized she had subconsciously begun flying back toward her home village and the rift—the very last place they needed to be.

"Mount Jeffers?" Cat asked Scottie.

"Probably what everyone else is thinking. So, no."

"We could hide out in the woods beyond Ashron," Cat said. "There's tons of clearings big enough to set down in. Maybe we should wait there and see if things calm back down."

"Which way is that?" Molly asked, turning to the others.

Cat pointed through the carboglass, her face rigid. Molly followed her trembling arm, adjusting course to match the direction she was pointing, mistaking the gesture for an answer to her question.

"What the *flank?"* Scottie muttered, leaning forward between the

two seats.

Ahead of them, descending through the atmosphere nose-down like a dropped dart, was a Navy StarCarrier.

“Holy shit,” Cat whispered.

Molly pulled back into a hover, sinking down toward the grasses.

Cowering.

The almighty bulk of the greatest class of starship ever built was descending from the heavens. Tilted slightly—falling slower than gravity warranted—the thing seemed to be straining against the inevitable, its forward thrusters raging to slow its impact. The great ship’s nose disappeared over the horizon, and then the rest of the monstrosity came to a sudden, sickening halt.

They all waited, breathless, for some cataclysmic noise to accompany the horrific fall. They watched for the ship to crumble, tip over, or maybe even explode.

It did none of those things.

Impossibly, the tail of the great StarCarrier remained in the same position. Askance. Aloft. Thrusters pointing up to the sky from which it had plummeted.

It just stood there, perfectly still. Terrible and lifeless.

33

Anlyn wrapped her hand in Edison's and squeezed one of his large fingers. "How confident do you feel about this?" she asked.

"Ninety-two percent," he said. "Rounding down, of course."

Anlyn frowned; she let go of his finger and hovered her own over the hyperdrive button. The coordinates for a class V star were locked in the computer, a sight that ran counter to everything she knew about astral navigation. Red lights flashed and alarms sounded, warning her of the poor choice of arrival coordinates. Only once before had she ever jumped while overriding a hyperdrive's alarms, and she was pretty sure that decision, for better or for worse, had been the most momentous of her entire life. *This* decision, however, seemed to rival that other one.

She closed her eyes, said, "I love you," and then pressed the switch.

Her stomach dropped. More warning alarms went off.

Edison screamed beside her.

Anlyn opened her eyes and caught a wave of harsh light across her face right before the windshield darkened, returning things to normal. A thousand white dots crawled across her vision like albino ants. She blinked rapidly, trying to sort out the foreign alarms and worrying about Edison.

"Are you okay?" she yelled. She applied thrust, then gripped the steering column with both hands. Her stomach had dropped because they were in free-fall. And the spots of light seemed to be flurries of snow.

"Zero optical functioning!" Edison roared in English.

"Great Hori, we're in atmosphere! I've got targets everywhere. Trying to get lift!"

A voice interrupted in a language she recognized, just as she knew the general look of their script: Bern. The words rattled for a few seconds, then stopped.

"Did you hear that?" Anlyn asked.

"Affirmitive," Edison said, fumbling for the radio, "They find our arrival vector non-optimal."

Anlyn grabbed the mic and pressed it into his groping paw. She had the ship leveled off and rejoining the other SADAR targets at altitude. She heard Edison grunt, clearing his throat; he launched into a conversation in Bern.

"That didn't sound like our speech," she said, once he was done.

Edison sat back in his seat, dabbing at his eyes with the back of his paws. "I'm ignoring our prior schematics," he said.

“What?” Anlyn settled into formation, flying by the instruments, the outside world shrouded in white. “What did you say to them?”

“I said flight eight twelve four, *Exponent*, falling into line, apologies for the fright.”

“Why would you do that?” Anlyn glanced over at Edison. “We came here to talk!”

He shook his head. “Our surviving the jump obviates the need for talk,” he said. “Assumptions have been validated: there’s an invasion underway. By extension, the Bern are little interested in nonmilitant communications.”

Anlyn settled down, the shaking in her arms subsiding as the rush of jumping into the center of a star and surviving gradually faded away. She looked at the grid-like pattern of targets spread out over thousands of kilometers, the blips flickering and sporadic from some sort of interference. Still, there was no doubting what she was seeing. A massive invasion force was assembled all around her—in fact she was now a *part* of it. Edison had been right about everything.

The voice on the radio returned and carried on for half a minute.

“What did he say?”

“He expressed grievances with our flight commander followed by orientation procedurals for us. We are presently queued up for the rift, number four hundred eighteen. Maintain velocity and minimize chatter. Resume three hour shifts.”

Anlyn laughed, her voice shaking with all things but humor. “Three hour shifts? Great. Who’s gonna take over for us so we can get some sleep?”

Edison shrugged. “Such logistics normally fall upon the commander, *Commander*.”

Anlyn turned to frown at Edison and saw his furry cheeks peeled back—his teeth flashing.

Anlyn laughed at him. Once more, without humor.

34

As *Parsona* crept toward the horizon, the full bulk of the StarCarrier came into view. It seemed to rise out of the ground like a geological formation—an obelisk defying time and gravity. While the majority of the ship appeared intact, the forward twenty percent had been crushed, or perhaps driven into the ground. Smoke streaked off the massive wreck in dozens of places, emanating from glowing-orange fires. Other than that, the hulking tower stood as a quiet memorial to a battle lost.

"Dang," Urg muttered.

Molly looked over her shoulder to see that the large Callite had squeezed in beside Scottie. The two of them were leaning forward, peering out through the carboglass at the gigantic ship ahead. Behind them, she could hear Walter continuing to put things away in the cargo bay. She turned back around and concentrated on keeping low to Lok's grasslands, rising now and then only to clear strips of straggly trees. She couldn't help but notice the way Cat strained forward in her seat, taking in the view. The Wadi did the same beside her, its neck stretched out, tongue flicking.

"Crazy to see something so invincible look… dead," Scottie said.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Cat said. She tore her gaze away and glanced around at the dash. "You got any 'scopes in this thing?"

"Like binoculars?" Molly shook her head. "No."

"I think they set down in the lake," Scottie said. "That's a shame."

As they got closer to the wreck, Molly saw he was right. Lok had no oceans, just a few puddles the locals exaggerated by calling them "lakes." The StarCarrier had landed right in the middle of one; the nose of the great ship was buried in a muddy crater and surrounded by pools of water covered in oil and fuel—some of them on fire. A wall of mud and dirt had been thrown up by the force of entry, forming a berm on the perimeter. The resulting barrier and moat looked purposefully built, like a warning to interlopers saying: "*Stay out.*"

Molly flew over the glistening brown wall and felt sad for the flashes of light twinkling on dry ground—the flapping of displaced swimming things. As she banked around to perform a full circuit of the ship, keeping *Parsona* low enough to feel safe from the fleet in orbit, she couldn't help but see the once-powerful craft in the same light as the fish: an animal out of its element with no way of putting it back. A thing dying, if not already dead.

As they rounded the port side, the stenceling on the side of the

ship came into view, and Molly lost what little breath she'd been holding.

ZEBRA-9200 "Gloria"

This wasn't just any StarCarrier, it was the very one she and Cole had escaped from two weeks ago. The realization made her feel like thrusting away from it, as if it still posed some threat to her. She read the hull designation several times, the surge of adrenaline passing as she forced herself to remain calm.

"So big," someone whispered.

Molly nodded. Up close, the ship seemed even more massive than it had in space, perhaps because the enormity of an entire cosmos wasn't swallowing it up, providing some sense of scale. It took almost fifteen minutes to do a slow lap around the mountain of metal. There were no signs of life, no lights or movement from survivors. Everywhere along the ground, the ship's hull was a twisted mess of shrapnel and torn plasteel, entire decks of the carrier crushed and impassible.

"There's no way in," Cat said.

"And no safe place to land and walk in *from*. I don't know what we were thinking to come out here."

"Curiosity," Scottie said. He leaned over the control console to peer up at the metal cliff looming ahead of them. "And didn't that kill the cat?" he asked.

"What about the hangar bay?" Cat asked, ignoring Scottie.

"We can look," Molly said, "but I'd think they'd have shut it before reentry."

She took *Parsona* up and spiraled around toward the ship's belly, remembering the last time she had flown along that very section of the massive carrier. Four Firehawks had been escorting her—their missiles armed and locked. The size and shape of the hull hanging in space had filled her with fear. She'd been convinced the Navy was about to airlock her and her friends for a string of tragic events.

Now, despite the unease she felt from recognizing the craft, it leaned sadly in the dry atmosphere of her backwoods home planet. Unmoving. Harmless. It didn't seem right that such a large creation could meet its end in such a short period of time, or end up somewhere as inconsequential as Lok.

"Damn thing's open," Scottie said, pointing to one of the carrier's airlock bays. "Can we fly in?"

Molly pulled up opposite the airlock. The StarCarrier was leaning to one side, the open hangar pointing up to the sky, which meant she had to angle *Parsona's* nose *down* so they could see inside. She reached for the spotlight controls before noticing the lights inside the bay were still functional.

“Something’s not right here,” she said.

“Nobody’s home,” said Cat.

That’s exactly what didn’t seem right. Molly could see the full length of the tilting hangar, all the way to the far wall, which hung way below them. There should’ve been a pile of Firehawks and Scouts down there, trillions of dollars of destroyed Navy hardware lying in a pile.

“Must’ve been in the fight,” Cat said.

“Or the crew used everything they had to escape.”

“I didn’t see nothing fly out on its way down,” Scottie said.

“Me neither, but there were Firehawks raining down earlier, before we left Bekkie.”

“Not enough,” Molly said. “There would’ve been hundreds of them aboard.” She turned to the others. “Should we peek inside? Look for survivors?”

Cat turned to her and shook her head. “Ain’t no one survive this. Not a crash like this.”

“Yeah, but there’s still power. Maybe someone—I dunno, I just always think there’s a chance.”

“If you wanna stick your nose in and take a sniff, be my guest. But get ready to hightail it when this puppy goes down.”

Molly turned the radio down to its lowest broadcast setting, just in case anyone in the fleet above was listening in. She brought the mic to her lips.

“Zebra wing—” She hesitated, trying to think up a lie, then figuring it didn’t matter. “—*Parsona* here. Any survivors, please come back on twenty-two eighteen.”

They waited. She adjusted the squelch until a faint hissing and popping assured her the speakers were operational. Nobody responded.

“Just a peek,” she told the others. She gripped the flight controls and replaced the mic, then nosed *Parsona* forward, back into the same bay from which she’d fled with Cole just a few weeks prior.

An easy in-and-out, she promised herself.

35

"You want me to meet someone called the *Bern* Seer?"

Cole shook his head. "I don't think so. I've had enough of the Bern."

Mortimor laughed. "She's no more a Bern than you or I, Cole. She's the one who's been watching them come. She's on *our* side, if there is such a thing."

"Where is she? *Here?"*

"No—"

"Further ahead," Arthur interjected, shouting above the rain. "As far ahead as you can go, in fact."

"Why does she want to meet me?"

"Won't say, but she's calling in a favor, a big one, and… well, I can't force you to go, but I'd owe you one of my own if you did."

Cole looked down at his hands beneath the folds of his clear plastic poncho. Water coursed across it, giving his flesh an artificial sheen.

"I'll go," he said quietly.

"Good," Mortimor said. He slapped Cole on the back. "Now, let's get out of the rain. I'll introduce you to doctor Ryke, who'll take you out."

Cole followed the two men forward, the pelting at his back driving him along and the rain to either side making him feel as if he could fall clean off the roof and go drifting after the droplets forever.

"Wait," he yelled up to the others. "Who's Ryke? Aren't you guys coming with me?"

"Sorry," Mortimor said, waiting up for him to catch up. "We've got plenty enough to do without a trip forward." He worked his hand out of the poncho and put it on Cole's back, urging him toward the stairwell. "Besides," he said, "she specifically asked to see you alone. Ryke's just driving you."

"Driving me? In *what?"*

••••

Half an hour later, Cole found himself cowering in the passenger seat of the answer. They called it a hyperskimmer, and it raced across the water on three foils, skipping like a cast stone and feeling completely out of control. As the craft sped directly into the driving rain, Cole fought the urge to scream; he ground his teeth and gripped the dash in pure terror, wondering how the hell Doctor Ryke could see

where they were going. As the craft's forward skiff tore through the watery surface of hyperspace, it kicked up twin roostertails to either side—large sheets of foaming whiteness that created an artificial canyon the small vehicle seemed to glide through. Every now and then, Cole glanced over to Ryke to make sure they were going to be okay. Each time, he found the strange man fiddling with a dial on the dash or looking at Cole while he talked.

"Don't you need to concentrate?" Cole asked the doctor.

Ryke looked at him for a long while. He took one hand off the steering column and scratched his thick, brown beard. He rubbed his bald head and adjusted his black goggles. Cole couldn't take it anymore. He turned and peered down the narrow chute of visibility created by the roostertails, certain that they were travelling far too fast for anything meant to come in contact with water.

Earlier, the vehicle had seemed pretty damn nebular, back when it was in the garage and sitting still. It was basically a flat triangle of steel sitting on three runners and topped with a sleek bubble cockpit. Ahead of the cockpit was a flat deck with a crane-like apparatus stowed flat. The whole thing was painted stark white and appeared fast even when idling. Cole had been excited to crawl inside, but now that they were racing along, hydroplaning across the wet surface of hyperspace half-blind, he just hoped to survive long enough to get back *out*.

"Concentrate on what, exactly?" Ryke finally asked.

Cole shook his head and pointed forward. "On where we're going!"

"Oh, I know exactly where we're going. Alls you gotta do is head right for the rain."

"Well, we seem to be doing that awful fast," Cole said.

Ryke laughed. "If we didn't, we'd never get there!" He leaned over toward Cole, as if about to confide in some secret. "She's shaped like a cone, you know."

Cole peeled his eyes away from the smeared carboglass. "What? The *Seer*?"

That really got Ryke going. He laughed and slapped his thigh. "Don't be silly! It's hyperspace that's shaped like a cone."

"Can we talk when we get back?" Cole asked. "I'm feeling a little sick."

"No problem. You just listen, then, and I'll do the talking."

Cole groaned.

"It all comes in at a point, hyperspace does. Like I said, it's pretty much a cone, but laying on its side. And it's always moving, not just the stuff in the air, but the surface, too. It's always sliding back into the past with new stuff and happenings coming in at the tip."

He paused, scratched his beard, and fiddled with a dial. “Not sure where it all *goes*, though. Maybe back around? Still working on that…”

Leaving the dial alone, he pointed forward, through the center of the two roostertails. “Anyways, the Seer lives out there. Impossible to miss her as long as we head into the rain. All the way forward, hyperspace ain’t so far around. Like I said, it’s the tip of a cone, so we don’t need a map. Now, getting *back* is different, but quicker. That’s what the radio’s for, so they know where to meet us.”

“Mortimor and them.”

“Right. Now, you keep quiet, not enough room in here to get sick.”

Ryke scratched his beard.

“Darnation, I was about to ask you a question. You gonna chunk if I ask you to nod?”

Cole shook his head. What he should’ve said was the *listening* was making him queasy. He altered his grip on the dash and saw his right hand had dented it, leaving impressions under each finger.

“I heard you was on Mortimor’s ship, the *Parsona*.”

Cole nodded.

“I built her, you know. The hyperdrive, anyway, not the ship. You notice anything peculiar about it? The hyperdrive, I mean.”

Cole shook his head.

“Hooo-eeee!” Ryke hollered. “That’s right!” He slapped the steering column with a flat palm. “Done her up good!”

Cole felt like sticking his head between his knees.

“Broke my heart to see her go, especially seeing as how.”

That piqued Cole’s interest. He turned to the doctor, who was looking right at him, one hand idly twisting a dial on the dash.

“What do you mean, *seeing how?”*

“Stolen,” Ryke said, growing solemn. He glanced forward for a picosecond, then stared back at Cole. “Dontcha know?”

Cole shook his head.

“Been about a year, now. Outside time, anyway. One of the sentinels—the guys that ride out in a perimeter around the HQ—they saw a patch of stars in the rain. Looked like a rift. We was prepping *Parsona* to make a break, get as many of us out as we could, when Byrne took off with her by himself. Broke Mortimor’s heart.”

“How did Byrne get his hands on the ship?” Cole asked.

“What? It was on the roof. We never even kept the thing locked.”

“Yeah, but where did Byrne *come* from? Why didn’t you guys stop him?”

Ryke stared at him. He rubbed his beard. “Darnation, son, how ill-informed are you? Mortimor and Byrne were best of buds. Joined at

the hip. That skinny freak took us all in."

"He lived *here?* Byrne?"

"Of course. We all came together. You do know he delivered his daughter, right? He was there when she was born. Saved his wife's life. That'll bond you to a feller."

"He—he delivered *Molly?"* Cole's nausea began to take a different form.

"Yup, but he didn't work his way into the group then. Not completely. Naw, it was really when Parsona took ill. That Bern bastard had loads of money. The sort of group we were, it never occurred to us to question anything for fear of those questions being redirected our way. When he offered to set her up at Dakura with the high and mighty, that pretty much made him an honorary member." Ryke shook his head. "A Bern in the Drenard Underground," he said.

Ryke turned away from Cole and peered through his side of the cockpit, even though there was nothing to see there but a wall of foamy spray. "I reckon we were all blinded by the glimmer of that jerk," he said softly.

"Any idea why he might've abandoned the ship when he got to Palan? You think he was worried the Navy might still be looking for it?"

"Don't know. Maybe. I'm more curious about why that rift even *went* to Palan. How in hyperspace did it form? Makes no sense, really. When we heard one was open, we figured it'd be one of ours on Lok actin' up."

"One of yours?"

"Yeah. Dontcha know? I'm the stupid genius that got us into this hubbaloo. Tried to help the resistance stage an invasion, but they got their butts whooped. Now that same passage is being used the other way around." Ryke lowered his bushy brows. "You looking a might bit pale, son, you're not gonna get sick, are ya?"

Cole shook his head. "No. Just confused."

"Good! That means you're paying attention. And yeah, I'd love to hear the story of what went down on Palan. Bet that's a good one."

"So why did Mortimor hide his wi—I mean, do you know about . . ?"

"Parsona? Yeah, he told Arthur about her after the ship vamooshed. That was a row. Like admitting to a good friend that you stole from him. Why hide her, you ask? I've got my own theories, but we ain't talked about his wife much. I reckon—just from my dealings with her, helping set that rig up—that she was gonna go crazy in that thing. Crazy as artificial intelligence can get. One's and zero's all scrambled, if you know what I mean. I think he was just freezing her in time to lock her away like that. Putting her down without erasing

her, you know? Like he couldn't bring himself to do it. Same reason people put their loved ones in cryo, even though there ain't no chance of getting them back."

Cole rolled that around while Ryke glanced forward for just a second.

"Other idea is he was hiding her from Arthur once he showed up. Or maybe he didn't trust Byrne deep down, I don't know. I think he was a lot ashamed of stealing her away—the selfishness of it all. Poor boy loved her too much, if such a thing's possible."

"It is," Cole said.

"Yeah? I wouldn't know."

Cole sat and watched Ryke power the hyperskimmer along, looking forward for the longest time he'd seen him do that, his goggles hiding whatever he was thinking.

"You're an okay guy, Doctor Ryke," Cole finally said.

"That's what they tell me!" the man hollered, laughing. "Ooops, there she is." He pulled back on the throttle and the roostertails receded, giving Cole a wider expanse of blurry nothingness to squint into.

"Where?" Cole asked.

"There!" Ryke said, pointing.

Cole peered through the sheets of spray until he saw it. At first, all he spied was some water flying upward—then he saw the hooves the water flew from! As they got closer, he could see a team of six horse-like animals galloping behind a small house, a shed roof over them and a porch to one side. At the end of the porch lay a small wall blocking the rain, creating a protected pocket for vehicles to dock up to.

Ryke eased into the space, putting them in the lee of the small wall as he matched speeds with the shack. He flipped a switch and Cole watched two claws come out the side of the skimmer and grab the walkway, pulling them tight.

"You go on ahead," Ryke said, popping the canopy open. "I'm gonna wait here and spell the Theryl's, give them hooves a rest." He patted the throttle lever for effect.

"Just go inside?" Cole asked.

Ryke laughed. "Way I's raised, we're taught to knock first!"

Cole shook his head and crawled out of his seat, keeping low to stay out of the rain. He knelt on the flattened rubbery deck just ahead of the skimmer's cockpit and reached across for the wooden railing. There was a gate there that hinged inward, but he just stepped over the thing instead.

The narrow passageway on the side of the cabin was unprotected, the water racing through the air sideways, so he hurried to the back

and around the corner to find shelter on the wide porch. The heads of two of the animals were just beyond the porch railing, their necks rising and falling with their long gait. One of them seemed to watch Cole with its large, single eye on the front of its head. Long whiskers trailed back from its mouth, making it seem like the creature was smiling. Cole studied the animals as they eased up, their legs just moving in easy circles instead of driving the shack forward. He wondered how long they could run like that.

As he was studying the animals, the shack lurched to one side unexpectedly, and Cole reached out to steady himself, clutching at the railing. His stupid right hand went straight through it, knocking out a chunk and leaving two splintered ends.

"Ah, hyperspace," he said, looking at the mess he'd made. He gripped one of the porch's posts to steady himself while he surveyed the damage, wondering what to do.

"It'll be fine," a voice said behind him. Cole turned and saw an old woman standing in the open doorway, her body draped in a thin gown.

He looked back at the broken railing, then turned to her. "I'm sorry," he said.

She waved him over, and Cole noticed she wasn't wearing goggles to protect her eyes. His heart fluttered with panic. He remembered Byrne, the only other person he'd seen who could withstand the light. He also remembered what they called the woman and wondered briefly if he'd been set up, if this was some sort of trap—

The woman waved again, the sleeve of her gown falling back to reveal an arm narrower than bone. "Come inside and get comfortable," she said. She backed through the doorway, her eyes focused on something distant and to Cole's side.

Cole stood a moment, indecisive. He looked over at the rear of the hyperskimmer, its engines purring with the strain of pushing the cabin into the rain. Everything within him said to feel threatened by the situation, but he couldn't. His normally reliable paranoia failed him for some reason. He crossed the porch, keeping his feet wide in case the cabin shuddered again, and stepped inside the cabin after the woman, who shut the door tight behind him.

There was a brief moment of pitch black as he worked his goggles loose. "I'm Cole," he said. He blinked in the dim light of the interior and took in his surroundings. The room was tiny, a hair more than a few meters to a side. A neatly-made bed rested in one corner, almost as narrow as the woman herself. The far wall had a counter, a sink, and some cabinets. A large barrel had been strapped to another wall; it sloshed with water, and a hose added more to its contents in steady drips. The entire space crackled with the sound of rain on tin, the

boards squeaking as the place rumbled along.

"But then," Cole said, "I guess you already knew my name, being a seer and all."

The lady smiled, her wrinkled face not matching her bright, beautiful teeth. She sat down by the head of the bed and patted beside herself. "I'm sorry I don't have much in the way of furniture. There's not enough need to merit straining the animals."

"That's okay," Cole said. He sat down at the foot of the bed and fidgeted with his goggles, turning them over and over in his lap. He concentrated on keeping his posture stiff as an uncomfortable silence somehow grew amid the din of rain on metal. He noticed the woman looked *near* him, but not right at him.

"Your eyes—" he stammered.

"Not so good in low light," the lady said, laughing. She leaned close to Cole. "Do you mind?" She held up both hands, palms out.

"I— *sure*," Cole said. He took her wrists, his hands easily encircling them, and leaned forward as he closed his eyes. She reached for his forehead first, just the pads of her fingers moving lightly against his skin. Cole let go of her wrists and remained still. It didn't feel invasive like he thought it would. It didn't feel strange at all. He kept his eyes tight as her fingers moved down to his checks, feeling his jawline and chin.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself looking right into hers; they seemed bright but unfocused.

Cole felt his heart stop for a moment as he lost himself in them—the brown with the yellow starburst, little ridges of black flying out from the pupil, giving them a depth he found… *familiar*.

"Do I *know* you?" Cole asked, as the lady sat back, smiling.

"Not yet," she said. "And I'm not who you think I am."

"You're not—?"

"Molly?" She laughed, a pleasant sound. "No, I'm not. I'm not half the woman she is." More laughter. "Literally," she said, running her hands through the air and down the length of her frail form, "as you can plainly see."

"Why did you want to meet me?" Cole asked. "Am I supposed to do something?"

"All you need to do is be who you are." She reached behind herself and arranged a pillow, then settled back, bringing one leg up onto the bed. "Can you keep a secret?"

"I think so."

"Don't tell Mortimor, but I wanted you out just so I could meet you. You can tell him it was important if you want, but that's the truth of it. I don't have much more to look forward to, but this was one of the biggies."

“Meeting me.”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

“I feel honored, I guess. So, how long do we have? What do you want to talk about?”

“Oh, life. Philosophy. The same sort of stuff you’re interested in. I also have a story or two you might find fascinating. But first, I wonder if you could do me a favor.”

“Sure,” Cole said. Already, he felt the most relaxed he had since crashing into hyperspace. The small cabin was like a pocket of normalcy within a raging storm of bewilderment. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Well, there’s a leak behind that counter,” the Bern Seer said, “and for the life of me I can’t see where the water’s coming from.”

36

Parsona's nose dipped into the carrier's flight bay, the glare of Lok's sun replaced by the warm glow of artificial lights.

"Suns 'a britches," Cat whispered. She cupped her hands around her face and pressed them against the porthole beside the nav chair. Molly hovered the ship just inside the cavernous hangar and looked out to port through her own circle of glass to see what Cat was reacting to.

"Flank me," she whispered.

It was the Firehawks. Dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe. They were piled high along the upper wall like they'd been shoved out of the way and had somehow gotten stuck there. The StarCarrier's hangar bay wasn't empty at all, the ships just weren't down around the bottom where they should've been—they were heaped up along the upper wall to either side of the open airlock.

Molly noted several ships had crashed back to the decking in front of the pile. They lay apart from the rest, forlorn, their wings crushed. The sight made her chest feel hollow, her stomach nauseous. Shapes she equated with power and grace looked like broken animals. Like dead things.

"Don't make no sense," Scottie said.

"It makes perfect sense," Molly whispered. She kept her voice soft, almost as if in reverence of the shattered hulls. She flew deeper into the hangar, then spun the ship around to survey the scene. The pile of debris sat on the sloping deck, up at the top, seemingly in defiance of Lok's gravity.

"The grav panels went out at some point," Molly said. "Maybe on impact, maybe before. The ships must've rattled around in here, crashing against that side, and then the grav panels kicked back on. Now they're holding the ships to the decking, which must feel like *down* for them."

Scottie leaned over the control console to peer at the wreckage. "Watch your hands," Molly said, nodding at the controls.

"Yeah, sorry." He gripped the back of the flightseats and squinted out through the carboglass. "You don't have any binoculars?" he asked.

Molly shook her head. "No. Just SADAR. Why do you ask?"

"Thought I saw something moving up there," Scottie said, pointing.

"That's not—"

"I see it too," Cat said. She leaned forward and peered toward the line of busted ships. "I'll be a Drenard's uncle," she said, "somebody's

alive in that cockpit!"

Molly was about to argue with them when she saw it as well. Something definitely moved inside one of the shattered canopies. It was impossible to make out any detail—it was just a dark form shifting behind a spider web of fractured glass.

"I'm gonna test the panels," Molly announced, almost out of habit, as if Cole were there and she needed someone to second the idea.

She lowered the landing gear and settled gently to the decking. As she reduced thrust, Molly waited for the ship to slide back, matching the lean of the StarCarrier, but *Parsona* didn't budge. The solid decking beneath them matched the evidence hanging above in all those Firehawks and their scattered debris: the StarCarrier's grav panels were fully functioning.

"This feels freaky," Scottie said.

"Forget about the planet," Molly told them. "Just concentrate on the decking. The decking is down." It was easy to say, but hard to sound convincing. White puffy clouds slid across the rectangle of blue at the end of the hangar bay. They were looking up a steep slope and trying to tell their bodies it was something else.

"Are we all gonna go out there?" Scottie asked.

"We might need the muscle," Molly said, already formulating a plan and making a list in her head. She looked back through the cockpit. "We might even need Walter. Anybody know where he is?"

••••

"I have to go," Walter thought. He peeked out of his room and up the length of the ship.

"Everything okay?" he heard through the band.

"Yeah, jusst—"

"Why are you thinking about sshipss going down, Walter? Iss everything alright?"

Walter cursed himself. He was concentrating on *not* thinking about that!

"It'ss fine, I jusst need to go help Molly."

"I undersstand. Hey Walter?"

"Yeah?" He glanced out again, then ran across and snuck into Molly's room while his mysterious friend kept talking.

"When you come ssee me and bring me thosse armss, why don't you bring Molly with you?"

Walter knelt by her bottom drawer, looking for the tell-tell hair. *"Why?"* he asked, dying to end the conversation and get out of there.

“I’d like to meet her. And bessidess, what good iss all that gold if you don’t have ssomeone to sspend it on?”

“I’ve gotta go,” Walter said, pulling off the band. He folded it up and stashed it away, then finally found the hair.

As he put the single follicle in place and snuck out of her room, he thought about a block of gold the size of a small moon. Barrel after barrel of solid gold so big you needed tugs to move them around.

And then he thought of how much Molly would really love a brand new starship. And he would buy her one. But first, he had to get her into orbit to meet this guy, which meant reprograming the crappy ship they were already in. How would he get his chance to do that? Molly wouldn’t trust him near the systems, and whatever she’d done to the cockpit door, it was enough that he couldn’t crack it. It was like the thing had a mind of its own. He had to find a way, somehow. His new friend—the voice behind the band—had said was that he was a very smart Palan and that he would figure something out.

And I will, Walter told himself.

He sure was glad to have met someone who knew he wasn’t stupid.

••••

Molly parked several hundred meters from the pile of ships, just in case any of them shifted. It made for a long hike with all the heavy gear they were toting—and it gave her plenty of time to appreciate how large the hangar was without ships arranged throughout.

Scottie and Urg carried the fuel tank for the cutting torch between them; Molly had the handheld radio and the large medkit; Cat carried a duffle full of blankets, water, and clean rags. Walter had volunteered to carry the torch and its tubing, which had started off neatly slung over his narrow shoulders, but loops kept sliding off, knotting in coils that he had resorted to dragging across the deck.

Together, they approached the Firehawk in which they’d seen movement. It lay upside down, on top of another broken ship. Everyone set their gear down in a base camp of sorts, all acting professional and calm. Except for Walter, who hissed with annoyance as he began unknotting the hose for the cutting torch.

“I’ll go up,” said Molly, “since I’m familiar with the torch. Scottie, you and Urg can give me a boost to the wing; Cat, you play out the hose.” She pulled the basic medkit out of the larger duffel and slung it around her neck.

Urg raised his hand.

“What is it, big guy?”

“I wanna look for others,” the Callite said, frowning.

“That’s a good idea. Scottie can boost me himself. Take the radio with you in case anyone starts transmitting.”

Urg nodded. He grabbed the portable radio from the top of a duffle and stomped off.

“Make some noise if you find anything!” Scottie yelled after him.

Molly waited for Walter to get the last knot out before attaching one end of the hose to the cutting tank. The dial showed a quarter-full, more than enough. She couldn’t believe they had found a *single* survivor, much less the dozen or so cuts it would need to deplete the tank.

“I’m ready,” she told Scottie, jerking her head up at the wing above.

He stood directly under it and formed a basket with his hands. Molly draped the hose around her neck and reached up for his shoulders as she put her weight in his palms. She could feel the muscles around his neck harden as he lifted her up effortlessly, high over his head.

“Whoa!” Molly reached up and grabbed the lip, steadying herself as Scottie practically tossed her on top of the wing. She stayed on all fours and turned around. “Nice and easy, big guy.”

Scottie smiled sheepishly as Molly took the loop of hose from her neck and pulled the cutting torch up. Behind her, she could hear the faint sounds of someone knocking, the thump of a boot against thick carboglass.

It took several tries with the sparker before the torch lit, the flint inside worn nearly smooth after so many years of use. When it finally caught, there was a loud pop as the excess gas exploded, followed by the purposeful hiss and blue flame of pressurized fuel burning upon release.

Molly twisted the dial on the side and concentrated on the shape of the white teardrop in the middle of the blue flame. Once it looked perfect for cutting plasteel, she locked the valve and slapped the carboglass several times with her palm. She waited for the noise within to stop, the dark form pulling away from the hazed glass. The entire canopy was so finely cracked, she couldn’t see inside, even from a meter away.

She studied the shape of the cockpit for a moment, determining the best and safest place to cut. One entire lip of the canopy was twisted out of shape, preventing it from sliding back and trapping the person inside. Looking at the way the Firehawks around her were warped out of shape, she couldn’t believe a human being could survive whatever had happened. She bent down and worked the flame over the lip of the side porthole, squinting at the bright light of

plasma as she gradually cut a circle out of the hull.

The entire section of frame fell inside the cockpit as the last of the cut was made. Molly killed the torch and bent down near the hole. “Keep back for a sec!” she yelled. She opened one of the water bottles and doused the edges of the plasteel, which popped and hissed violently but lost their red glow.

Two gloved hands emerged. They grabbed the jagged lip, and a helmet followed. Molly realized at once how the pilot had survived the crash: his lifesupport umbilical was still jacked in by his armpit, catching on the edge of cut steel. She reached down and popped it loose as the man fell out of the hole and onto the wing of the lower Firehawk. He kicked at the surface with his heels, scrambling backward and fumbling with his helmet.

“What’s going on up there?” Scottie yelled from below.

Molly ignored Scottie’s shouts. “Hold still,” she told the pilot. She grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him down before reaching for the clasps on his helmet. The dome popped off, revealing a young spaceman with sweat-matted hair and eyes wide with fear.

“It’s okay. Calm down.” Molly looked him over for signs of injury. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Higgins. Private Higgins,” he said. “Deck maintenance, third shift. I—” his eyes focused on something beyond Molly. “Where’re the others?” he asked.

“Keep calm.” Molly handed him a bottle of water from the medkit. “You were smart to get plugged in,” she told him.

Higgins took a long swig from the bottle, wiped his chin, then looked down at his flightsuit. “Jonesy,” he said, rubbing his fingers over the name patch. “He told me to do it. Gave me one of his extra flightsuits. I think he knew we were going down before we even got hit. He ran off for the Admiral, I think he was trying to save the old man—”

“Saunders?” Molly asked.

Higgins nodded. “Yeah.” He stopped and looked up at Molly. “Are you a part of some kinda rescue operation?”

“I— Not really. There might not be anyone else to rescue,” she said.

“Everything okay up there?”

Molly went to the edge of the wing and looked over. “A scared mechanic. He jacked into the life support. The antigrav suit kept him alive. Gimme a sec with him so he’ll be okay to climb down—”

Loud banging echoed down the line of ships, cutting her off. Scottie and Cat turned and looked toward the sound; Molly followed their gazes. In the distance, she could see Urg waving his arms and pointing up to another Firehawk.

“Pants on fire,” Cat whispered. “I think we have more survivors.”

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There were eight of them in all. Five pilots, two navigators, and Higgins. The two paired-up crew members had been on deck, ready for lift-off, when the grav panels failed. Everyone’s story was the same and equally awful: they had held tight in abject terror while the ships were flung from one side of the hangar to the other, everyone fearful their Firehawk would rattle out the open hangar doors, or they would lose life support.

Certainly, some others had.

None of the Gs suffered had been too much for the flightsuits, and everyone seemed fit, if dehydrated and terrified. Molly and her little rescue crew stayed so busy crawling across the wreckage, cutting people out and getting them food and water, that she hardly noticed the odd dynamic forming. Pilots—some of them twice her age—were looking to her and her friends as if they were in charge.

While Urg continued to search for anyone left alive in the tangled mess—refusing to give up even when it seemed unlikely there were any more—Molly and the others sat with the crewmen, trying to console them. They all had a defeated, dazed look, almost like animals after a near-drowning.

Molly peeled the wrapper off a protein bar and handed it to one of the pilots. His eyes were unblinking, wide and wet.

“It was the Drenards, wasn’t it?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “No. It’s something worse. Now listen, we need to figure out—”

“What’s worse than Drenards?” someone else asked.

“Is it the Tchung?”

“It’s not the Tchung,” Molly said.

“Gotta be the Dremards. I heard they were coming out of their arm of the Milky Way for the first time. They attacked Rigel!”

Molly held up her hands. “It’s not Drenards—”

“What then? Did you see them? What was it?”

“Listen,” she said. “The first thing we need to do is help the rest of the crew. See if any of the staff survived. Then we can—”

“Survived?” Higgins squeaked. “Nobody but us survived! How could they? There was almost ten thousand people on this ship, and now there’s *eight!”* He looked at his palms. “Darlene,” he said, then started sobbing, covering his face with his hands.

Molly rose and went to him. She wrapped her arm around his shoulders and looked to the others. “We’ll mourn when we can and for

as long as they deserve, but right now we need to—"

"We need to get off this ship!" someone said.

"And we will," Molly told them. "We will. But first, we need to see if anyone else survived. According to Higgins, here, one of the pilots went off to help the senior staff—"

"They're dead!" one of the pilots said. "C'mon, the only safe place in this bucket was to be rattling around in one of our little tin cans."

"That's not true," Molly said. "There's one other place we need to check. Just in case."

One of the pilots—Roberts, according to his name patch—met her with a solid look. His eyes were aware, vibrant, not as red as the others.

"Where's that?" he asked.

"The simulator room," Molly said.

••••

They left the survivors behind with Urg, who insisted on continuing his search for life among the debris. Several of the pilots suggested they come along and help, but Molly stood firm, pretending to be looking out for their well-being. In reality, she didn't want to get bogged down if they came across bodies of people they knew, forcing her to tend to *their* nerves instead of potential survivors. Also—and she hated to admit it—she didn't want to get outnumbered if any of them found out who she was. According to the report she'd found in the Navy database, she and her ship were the highest of high-priority targets. And now they were back on the same damned Navy StarCarrier she had once escaped from.

She swiped one of the pilot's badges through a door reader and let Walter go through first. He led the way with his computer, the schematics for the ship pulled up from his last hack of the place. Molly looked at the badge in her hand, the one that had opened the door, and wondered if the gesture had even been necessary.

They made haste down the hallway that led to the stairwells, not trusting the elevator shaft after a crash landing; it could easily be just as twisted as the Firehawks. They each carried biotubes from one of the pilot's survival kits, and Cat had a flashlight, just in case.

Inside the landing of the stairwell, they came across their first bodies, barely recognizable as such. Not welded down like everything else aboard the ship, they had been flung all over the stairwell when the grav panels had temporarily failed. They left behind not much more than smears of red wetness on the walls and on the underside of the rising flight of steps. Flightsuits lay scattered in lumpy reminders

of what the mess had originated from.

Molly tried to focus into the distance as she stepped gently through the slick, chunk-filled puddles. She gripped the railing to the side. When her hand went into something wet, she had to stifle her gag reflex and fight to remain in control of her senses. She led the way down the steps, two flights, both of which were covered with and reeking of human remains.

Behind her, Scottie coughed into his hand. Molly reached back and clutched Walter's sleeve, helping steady both of them, physically and emotionally. She scanned open the door on the crew deck and waved them through, each of them pale and holding their breath. All except for Walter, who didn't seem fazed; his attention was firmly locked onto his computer.

"This way," he said calmly.

Scottie leaned against the bulkhead, his head bowed down. "We're gonna have to find a different way back," he said. "I've seen some flanked-up shit in my day, but nothing like that."

"They were probably told to—" Molly fought hard to swallow, "—told to get in the stairwell. Like an emergency drill. Either that, or everyone thought of the suits in the hangar and got backed up trying to get there." She grabbed Scottie's arm and led him after Walter, who was waiting at the next turn.

"I can't imagine what it must've been like to be in there," Cat said.

The words popped a visual in Molly's mind: the tight confines, packed and rattling with dozens and dozens of Gs. It would've been awful.

"We're not gonna find anybody down here," Scottie complained. "I'm thinking we should head back."

"It's just around the corner," Molly assured him. Walter had shown her schematics of the carrier; the sim room and the hangar were situated above and below the pilot's quarters, as if to reduce their foot travel.

Walter ran ahead, leading the way to the simulator room. The smell of blood and oil seemed to permeate the lower decks as fluids leaked out of broken things. Molly fought to ignore the occasional body they went by. Even the sight of a bag of laundry, open and disgorging crumpled Navy blacks, filled her with sorrow. *What was left of the person who had been rushing off to wash those?* she wondered.

As they caught up to Walter and neared the simulator room, Molly realized Scottie had been right. They weren't going to find anyone alive down there. If someone had survived in a simulator pod, they would surely be running up and down the decks by now, looking to rescue others or trying to flee the ship.

Expecting to find the room intact, the pods empty or full of more horror, Molly stepped inside with her hopes low—when she *should've* been concentrating on keeping her defenses *up*.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of crewmen had been packed in the simulator room—it was impossible to tell exactly how many. Their bodies formed a wall of gruesome death on the far side of the room, stacked up in a scene eerily reminiscent of the Firehawks piled high in the hangar. Jumbled up, mounded like a snowdrift, they formed a slope of tangled forms, their individual parts woven together and indistinguishable.

The marks their flying bodies had made spotted the room, dotting the pods, the floor, even the ceiling with bright marks of crimson. Molly caught herself on the doorjamb and tried to wave away the others before they joined her. The sound of Scottie gagging behind her let her know she'd been too late.

"Flank me," Cat said. "They were all thinkin' the same thing."

"Let's go," Molly told them. She pushed her way past her friends and back into the hallway, which suddenly seemed positively laden with fresh air. She tried not to think about what those people had gone through, what their last moments had been like. The crowded panic, the fearful silence, and then… the horrible rattling and crushing.

"Ssomethingss knocking," Walter said from the room.

"I think that's my knees," Scottie said. "I don't feel so good."

"Sssshhhh," Walter hissed.

Molly stepped back by the door but didn't dare look inside. She listened around the corner for a sound, but could only hear her heartbeat in her ears. Scottie came out bent over and covering his mouth with the back of one hand.

"Damn, I think I heard it too," Cat said.

"It'ss coming from the podss," said Walter.

Molly steeled her nerves. Keeping her eyes low, she reentered the room. She stood there, perfectly still, holding her hands out to urge the others to be as quiet as possible.

There. A muffled pounding. Running to the nearest pod, she clanged up the steps and slapped on the egg-shaped compartment before pressing her ear to it.

"You hear anything?" Cat asked, climbing up the steps.

"Someone yelling, I think. But these things open from within, so I don't get why they'd need help."

Cat ran up the steps of another pod and rubbed her hands across the hatch. "Are they damaged?"

"Doesn't look—"

The pod twitched, rotating in its base. Molly stepped back. Walter

hissed at the pod closest to him, which seemed to have moved in unison.

"Of course!" Molly ran down the steps and toward the control room.

"Of course, what?" Cat called out after her.

"A simulation is still running. Somebody must've—"

She stopped when she entered the control room. The remains of that very somebody were smeared all over the small booth. Their body lay crumbled in a heap in one corner, the spaceman's flightsuit so flat it appeared empty. Molly looked away, but the sight was seared on her retina, overlaid onto so many other horrific images. She thought about the sacrifice this person had made and silently honored him.

The keyboard and screen were a mess, but she had to do something about the pod controls. She pulled the medkit over her shoulder and around in front, then groped inside for a gauze pad. Using the medical fabric to remove a smear off the screen made it impossible to imagine the mess as anything other than blood. The pad soaked it up dutifully.

CONTROLLER - GERALD "JONESY" RICKSON
PROGRAM - ZERO G MAINTAIN
E.T.C. - 1:42
ENEMY TYPE - NONE
ENEMY COUNT - 0
POD LINK - ALL
CONTINGENCY - DISABLED

Molly glanced at the flight routine summary. The adjacent SADAR screen showed a cluster of virtual Firehawks drifting in space. The routine still had almost two hours to go, a gross overestimation for how long the crash would take. Then again, she probably would've done the same thing, taking no chances on an early exit.

Using the gauze to hold down the CTRL button, she jabbed the BREAK key with a knuckle, then ran back outside while the simulation wound down.

"Scottie, we're gonna need you in here," she called out the door. "Everyone, get ready to guide any survivors out. Keep their focus away from the back of the room. We'll form up and meet in the hallway." She turned to Cat. "Come with me," Molly said.

She ran toward the far pods, the ones that would be closest to the tangle of bodies. It would be important to get any surviving occupants away as quickly as possible. Molly wasn't sure how, but having something to work on—people to be responsible for—made crossing the room possible. She felt grateful for the temporary immunity and focused on the slim chance that the simulators had kept the Admiral

safe.

She forgot, for just a moment, that *she* might not be safe if he was.

••••

The hatches started popping open as soon as the simulation shutdown procedure completed. Cries of anguish and relief spilled out of the pods just before the people did. Men and women exited their simulators and shouted for one another. As they emerged, it proved impossible to keep them from seeing what lay at the far end of the room. Moans of agony and peals of disbelief rang out, along with a smattering of curses. Molly found herself yelling at grown men to head for the exit, the white hair and beards on many of them signifying rank their borrowed simulator suits belied.

Everyone seemed too stunned to care that they were being yelled at by a teenager, a Callite, a Palan, and a roughneck local. Their state of shock made them more like cattle, giving Molly and her friends easy verbal control of them. She felt a wave of confidence and surety wash over her—the hours they had already spent around the horror had put her group in a much better state than these survivors. The four of them had descended through the gore in stages, rather than hatching directly into the worst it had to offer.

Molly corralled a dozen survivors together and guided them, pushing and prodding, toward the hallway. They clung to one another like refugees, knees weakened by an emotional ordeal no less taxing than a physical one might be.

Cat lagged behind with another cluster, including a few women. In fact, ahead of Molly—clustered around Walter and Scottie—there seemed to be quite a few women among the survivors. Further ahead, an older gentleman leaned against the rear of a pod and threw up on the decking. Several other people seemed to have been physically sick. Molly swallowed hard and tried to focus on getting everyone out of there.

“Into the hallway,” she yelled.

Most of them didn’t need to be told. Many *ran* out, clutching their stomachs or sobbing into their hands, men and women alike.

As she guided her own group forward, Molly heard someone yelling from inside one of the simulators. She left Cat in charge of her survivors and stomped up the steps, only to find yet another level of disgust: someone hadn’t gotten their suit plugged in. Either that, or the grav link had failed. The other occupant, a young man, seemed unscathed but in a state of shock. He held the body in his lap, the

arms of the deceased dangling to either side with the litheness of a hundred joints.

At least, thank the gods, the suit's seals had remained intact.

"I need you to come with me," Molly told him. She ducked into the pod and reached for the limp body in his lap. The survivor stared at her, visor open, mouth slack, a dull whine leaking out. It was the sound of distilled agony. Of confusion and regression.

Grabbing the limp figure, Molly shifted it to the other seat and nearly threw up inside the simulator pod. The form inside the outfit felt pulverized. Chunked. She bit down on her tongue to divert her attention with some pain while she folded the suit and its contents out of the man's lap.

"We need to go," she told him. She unbuckled his harness and pulled him toward the open hatch. The man continued to make a strange moaning sound as she guided him out and down the steps.

They were the last two out into the hallway. As they approached the door, Molly felt the need to turn around, to make sure there weren't more people to help. It was hard to do with the knowledge of what lay behind, but she looked anyway. Everyone that could be saved was out. The percentages—seeing how many didn't stand a chance—it made her feel sick.

In the hallway, she found most of the survivors sitting along the wall, some of them prone. The medkit felt ridiculous across her back; nobody needed so much as an adhesive strip. What they should've brought down was more water and rations. Molly saw that the little nourishment they did have was already being passed around; she worked her way down the line of bedraggled spacemen, checking eyes for alertness—when she found him. Found herself face-to-face with Admiral Saunders.

Their eyes met—and his widened.

"You."

Molly nearly burst out in tears to see someone she knew, someone from her seemingly long-ago past. Saunders represented a thread back to normalcy; she could see him and remember being young and only miserable in frivolous ways. She could remember, with longing, the simple pain of being yelled at, of being treated poorly. She approached, holding out a bottle of water, but he slapped it away.

"You need to drink," she told him.

He looked to either side of himself, surveying those nearest him. Molly noticed the men and women clustered around him had the most gray in their hair and the least trauma in their eyes. They bore the haggard look of veterans, the creases made by years of worry had become permanent in expressive wrinkles.

"Arrest her," Saunders said meekly, looking to his subordinates.

“She’s the one—”

Molly knelt down and rested a hand on his shoulder. “We need to get everyone out of here,” she said, “and you need to drink some water. You can airlock me later, if you like.”

He frowned as she pushed the water into his hand. A thin man with wispy gray hair slid close and grabbed the bottom of the bottle, moving it to Saunders’s lips. The gray man met Molly’s eyes with his own; he nodded slowly to her as the Admiral slurped from the bottle.

Molly stood up and looked around herself. There had to be almost a hundred of them. With what few they had rescued above, it was but a sliver of a fraction of a percent of the total crew. The tragedy of this one act alone was mind-numbing. The thought of it happening throughout the galaxy was too terrible to even register. At least one cruiser had also gone down, then there were all the Firehawks and support craft—

Molly left Saunders in the care of the others and walked back down the center of the hallway. She wondered how they were going to get everyone through the stairwell and into the ship. And how many flights back and forth with *Parsona* would it take to keep everyone comfortable? And where would she take them? All the way back to Bekkie?

She was mulling this over, surveying the crowd, when she noticed Walter standing by the doorway of the simulator room, staring inside. His eyes were narrowed, his silvery, stubbly head leaning forward as he gazed in the direction of the far wall.

“Don’t look at it, Walter.” She walked up and put her hands on his narrow shoulders, trying to turn him away.

“Ssomething’ss wrong,” he hissed.

“I know, buddy, but we’ll get through it together, okay?”

“No.” He shrugged her hands off his shoulders. “Ssomething’ss *really* wrong. It *moved.”*

Molly forced herself to look at the pile of bodies in the distance. “Nothing moved in there, Walter. Your eyes are playing tricks on—”

One of the bodies on top of the steep pile fell away from the rest; it rolled sickeningly across the simulator room, joints folding in ways they shouldn’t. And then it came to a sudden halt. Several other bodies followed suit, all of them coming to a stop at the same place, their limbs tangled and supple.

Suddenly, a large chunk came loose—a crowd. The rest of the wall followed in a sudden avalanche of bodies. The corpses tumbled across the steel decking together, skidding to an eerie halt in a wide dune of the dead.

Walter pulled back from the room, hissing.

“What’s wrong?” Cat asked, walking over and steadying Walter.

She peered past Molly. “What in the hell?”

“Get everyone together,” Molly whispered. “We need to get out of here.”

“What’s going on?”

Molly turned to Cat. “The grav panels are failing.”

Part XV – Coming Together

"What greater tragedy is there than two lovers, racing for each other, desperate and longing, only to pass, unbeknownst, in the darkness?"

~The Bern Seer~

37

Cole held the wooden sword with his right hand and twirled it in the air. It made a satisfying, swooshing sound. Arthur frowned at him.

"More wrist," he said. "You don't have a new shoulder, so the power has to come from your elbow and wrist."

"Why not just give me a new shoulder?" Cole asked, smiling.

"Because it's expensive and parts are hard to come by. But more importantly, where would you want me to stop? Replace everything from the neck down? At what point would you quit feeling like you?"

"Maybe everything from the neck up would be better," someone said.

Cole turned to the voice—

It was the girl with the red hair. She had on one of the same training suits he'd been given, her bright locks up in a tight bun and a wooden sword in her hand.

"Have you two officially met?" Arthur asked.

"That's a good question," Cole said. He stepped forward and extended his hand. "Have we?"

"Penny," the girl said, grabbing his hand and squeezing it. Hard.

Cole tried to pull away, but she had an iron grip.

"I don't think we have," she said, smiling. "Not *officially*."

Arthur clapped his hands together. "Okay, you two square off. Just the basics today. Bear with me, Penny, and go easy on the lad."

"I will," she said, winking at Cole and freeing his hand.

He looked down at it and flexed his artificial fingers, marveling at the pain interface.

Arthur turned to Cole. "Any fencing at the Academy?"

"Two semesters," he said proudly.

"Aw, hell," Arthur said. "Well, do me a favor and forget all that nonsense. Buckblades aren't swords."

"Buckblades? The invisible things?"

"That's right." Arthur stepped over and adjusted Cole's grip on the handle. "Buckminster Fuller came up with the design hundreds of years ago. Well, sorta." He ran his hand down the wooden approximation of a blade while he talked. "It's a single matrix of carbon laced with iron, neodymium, and cobalt. Extremely ferromagnetic, okay? Super sharp. But the trick is in the blade's handle, that's where the electromagnetic field is created that spools the wire out and keeps it stiff. The blade'll cut through damn near anything."

"Even each other?"

"Sharp kid," Arthur said, looking at Penny and jabbing a thumb

his way. She shrugged and twirled her stick in a graceful pattern, so fast Cole could hear the air screaming in protest as it tried to move out of the way.

"No, not each other. Buckblades have orthogonal magnetic charges, otherwise they'd fly out of your hand and stick to something metal, get it?"

"Orthogonal?" Cole asked. "Is that positive or negative?"

"Neither. There's two other kinds of magnetic fields, monopoles that can be harvested here in hyperspace. All Buckblades have the same charge, so it's almost impossible to get them together, much less cut through one another."

"They fly away from each other? Why not make some of them with the opposite charge, then?"

Cole tried to mimic the pattern Penny was making, which made her laugh.

"You just lost your clever points, son. Now I have to assume you got lucky before."

"What do you think would happen?" Penny asked, taunting him.

"They'd stick together?"

"That's putting it mildly, now pay attention. When someone swings at you, you can't get hit. Not even a little, okay?"

"I think he's learned *that* lesson," Penny said. She darted forward and smacked the back of his right hand with her sword.

Cole dropped his weapon and shook his hand, glaring at her.

"Good point, Penny. Now, Cole, keep a firm grip on your sword." Arthur bent down, picked it up, and handed it back to him. "Don't crush the thing, but try not to drop it."

"Why'd you make the thing feel pain?" Cole asked, rubbing his hand.

"Same reason God made the other one that way. So you'd take care of it. Now listen, you don't want to get hit. Not *once*. And you can't really block your opponent's attacks, they'll just repulse each other—"

"How does this work, then? He who swings first, wins?"

"The other way around, usually. See the slits on your sword?"

Cole inspected the wooden blade. There were deep cracks running down the length of the thing. He nodded.

"When you swing the practice swords at each other, internal sensors calculate where they would be repulsed to. Lights in the blade shine out and your suit picks them up—"

"Oh, so it's like a game of billiards. It's all about the bank shots."

"Okay, another clever point for you. Now, most fights end with someone's own sword coming back and hitting them. With the right block and a forceful enough stance, you can send most attacks back

where they came from. Think of your sword more as a shield. It's your *opponent's* sword that's your real weapon, and *your* sword is theirs. Get it? So learn to fear what you're holding and figure out how to attack with what *their* wielding. Now, Penny will show you the basic attack angles—the safest ones. They aren't what you'd think, so pay attention and unlearn your fencing."

Cole nodded and tried to take the same stance as Penny: feet apart, shoulders square, pretty much the exact posture that would've gotten him a beating from Lieutenant Eckers, his old fencing instructor.

"The power is from side to side," Penny told him. "It's in your hips." She moved hers back and forth while Cole watched.

"You're supposed to try it too," she said, reaching out and smacking his sword.

"Oh, yeah." He moved his hips side to side, swinging the wooden stick just like she did.

"It's a lot like a judo throw, or a good roundhouse. If you don't get your whole body in on it, you won't go far."

"Gotcha," Cole said, trying to ignore the way her suit hugged her body.

"Give me your best shot."

Cole's feet shuffled automatically, trying to get back into a proper fencing stance. Penny lashed out with her sword, which he instinctively blocked. Solidly. The wooden shafts smacked together with a satisfying crack.

Both thighs on his suit lit up, showing him where he would've lost them.

"You've got no power like that," Penny said, tapping his hip with her sword. "This isn't a contest where you score points and gab with your opponent about whose mother smells worse." She rapped his sword with hers, then tapped him in the stomach. "There's nothing noble or fun about this, okay? It's one swing and you're dead. There isn't anything heroic about it, and nothing fun or pleasant, even for the winner."

Cole nodded, resuming his square-on stance. "Have you been in real fights with these?"

"Do I sound like I'm reading from a textbook? Trust me, it isn't pretty."

"I've seen what they can do," Cole told her.

"It's different when you're the one doing it. Now, there are three major angles you need to learn and two sub angles—they're your safest attacks and the hardest to parry. Forget thrusts altogether, okay?"

Cole nodded as she began the first lesson; he tried his best to

absorb it all. He also tried to watch her hips only when she told him to. Finally, he tried his damnedest to pretend that Arthur—standing to one side and offering suggestions—was Molly. Watching him. Reading his mind with a D-band. Forcing him to stifle his thoughts.

It helped him to imagine Penny was someone else. Anyone but the flaming girl from his strange dream. And finally, as they began to spar, their swords clashing while they discussed angles of deflection, he tried his damnedest to ignore her red hair. He pretended instead that Penny was a blonde.

The one who had taken his arm.

38

"Move swift, but stay calm," Molly told everyone, as the survivors marched past in a black column of Navy flightsuits. They jogged, but refrained from pushing on one another. Their brains may have checked out, but the military training remained, coming back thanks to the hint of danger—the fear propelling them forward. Ahead, Scottie stood by the door to the stairwell, waving the crewmen through.

When a logjam forced everyone to a halt, Molly fought her way through to the stairwell where she found several people on the ground, sliding in the spilt blood and gore.

"Grab the rails!" she told them. "Help each other up! C'mon, let's go!"

Back in the hallway, someone screamed, and it soon turned into a chorus of frightened shouts. Molly stuck her head back into the hallway and saw—in the distance—bodies dripping out the door of the simulator room.

The panels were failing in sequence.

Pure terror coursed up through Molly's body. She expected, at any minute, the gravity holding her to the deck would simply vanish. She imagined the ship as she'd seen it from outside, its thrusters up in the clouds. The visual gave her vertigo. She realized, suddenly, that she was standing on the face of a cliff. The thought made her feel faint; people began pushing past her, scrambling up the slick steps, some of them on all-fours.

Molly found herself swimming amongst them, pulling herself ahead, racing up wet steps and over bodies alive and otherwise. The fear was gone, replaced with a keen awareness of what could happen next.

She needed to get to *Parsona*, and fast.

At the top of the stairs, she came across Cat, who was helping people up and through the door. The entire front of her was smeared with blood; Molly looked down and realized she was covered in it as well.

"I have to get to the ship. Get everyone to me as fast as you can!"

"Will do!" Cat yelled as she helped another person up. The two of them locked eyes, and Molly saw none of her own panic and fear in the Callite's eyes. If anything, they sparkled with life.

Molly turned away and bolted through the door. She ran at a full sprint down the hallway, urging the stumbling survivors on as she passed them. She yelled for them to get to the hangar bay and into her ship. As she ran ahead, she tried to picture the layout of the

StarCarrier to figure out which direction the panels were failing. She wondered whether she was heading *toward* the problem panels or *away* from them.

Away, she finally decided. Otherwise she would probably have already met them.

She skidded through the open door halfway down the hall and burst into the hangar; she slipped, fell, then scrambled back to her feet. “Get to the ship!” she yelled to Urg, who was still ranging up and down the line of Firehawks in the distance, looking for survivors. She didn’t see the other pilots at first, but saw movement inside *Parsona*. She pictured the number of upright people she could cram in its hull as she sprinted toward her ship and past the staggering survivors who had reached the hangar ahead of her.

“What in hyperspace?” one of the pilots asked as she stomped into the cargo bay. Molly imagined how she must look to them, all covered in blood. She thought about what they were in store for.

“Get ready to help,” she told them. She flipped the thrusters on and looked through the carboglass at the line of survivors spilling out the door. “There’re bottles of water in the cabinet above the fridge. We’re gonna need to pack people into every corner of the ship, even the lazarrette and cargo holds. Get them open. And grab that med kit over the sink, just in case.”

Several of the pilots went to work, their focus galvanized by her tone. Higgins leaned over the control console. “What can I do?” he asked, jumping back as the Wadi took its place on Molly’s shoulders.

“Help the others,” she said. “Actually, get out there and yell at Urg to get a move on.” She looked up. “There’s no time to find any more—”

She stopped and sucked in her breath. Urg was sliding across the steel decking, toward *Parsona*, followed by a wall of tumbling, ruined starships.

He came to a sudden stop before reaching the door the survivors were streaming through. Molly held her breath; she watched him glance over his shoulder at the pile of plasteel and carboglass heading his way. The long queue of surviving crewmen filing out of the hallway door ducked and turned at the sound of it all; some of them covered their heads with their arms. Molly could see Walter among them, tugging on someone in black, urging them toward the ship.

She looked back toward Urg, but he had disappeared under the line of sliding debris. *Gone*. The end of his life missed behind her blinking eyelids. The entire tangle of ships had come to rest in a long line, signifying the temporary boundary between failed panel and good.

Several more survivors staggered through the door in the distance

as the first of the crewmembers stomped into *Parsona*. Molly could hear some of the pilots directing them aft and urging them to take water. She saw Cat in the distance, helping someone along who seemed to be limping, their front solid red.

The dune of debris behind them shifted once again. One of the Fire-hawks flipped over on its side. Cat and the crewman left their feet, sliding ahead of the ships and across the deck, everything falling toward *Parsona*.

Cat popped to her feet as soon as she came to a halt at the next line of functioning grav plates. Molly saw her look back over her shoulder at the man she'd been escorting, but she seemed to know better than to struggle with him. She dove forward as the rolling crush of taxpayer dollars ground to a halt right behind her, smashing the crewmember flat.

Molly silently begged Cat forward as she feathered the thrusters. They were warm enough for lift, but not much more. She aligned the ducts ahead of time and looked over her shoulder to see how things were going in the cargo bay.

The staterooms must've already been packed—the hallway had filled up, and people were crammed together up to the galley. The last large crush of survivors could be heard working their way inside—only Cat and a few stragglers remained.

That's when the struggling grav system gave up the ghost—the last of the panels giving away completely. Molly felt it shudder through *Parsona* before she saw the effects outside. She could hear the screeching of the ship's landing pads as they scraped across the deck, could see the walls outside shift forward as *Parsona* slid back along the hangar floor. Beyond the wall of tangled Navy ships, she could see through the top of the StarCarrier's airlock door to the bright, blue Lokian sky beyond.

The view disappeared as the jumbled mess of Firehawks ground forward, chasing after *Parsona*. Between the two, Cat and a few other crewmen slid on their backs, their screams deadened by the roar of all else. Everything was in free-fall, like all the players had been tossed over a cliff.

Molly pulled *Parsona* up to stop her slide backward. She retracted the landing gear to get it out of the way, but left the cargo hatch open. Behind her, passengers were screaming. She glanced at the chase cam and saw several forms falling away behind, people that had not quite made it to the loading ramp.

There was nothing she could do for them. She wasn't even sure she could save the rest. The thrusters were still warming up, barely managing the vast weight onboard, the turbines wailing in complaint. Molly fought to hold the ship steady; she watched as Cat and the

others slid across the deck ahead of the tumbling crush of ships.

"Get ready back there!" she yelled over her shoulder. Feathering the thrust a little more, she turned the ship sideways, watching everything through the nav porthole. She held the lip of the cargo ramp to the deck as she backed up—lining it up with the crewmen sliding ahead of Cat. Behind them, the rolling mass of Firehawks seemed to be gaining.

The crewmen disappeared from sight as they got close. Molly could hear grunts and yells behind her, along with the satisfying thud of heavy objects impacting the lowered ramp, all sounds that hinted at Cat and the other crewmen having been scooped up. Someone shouted for her to go—but she already was. She fired the thrusters up and back as she fell away from the onrush of twisted, roaring steel, doing everything she could to lift the struggling ship above it.

A collision warning sounded out as she approached the solid wall at the back of the hangar—at the *bottom* of the hangar now that Lok's gravity was in charge. Molly adjusted the thruster vents and punched the accelerator to full, shooting *Parsona* above the lowest section of the mound of moving debris.

The wing of a spinning Firehawk caught *Parsona's* belly, shuddering the entire ship and sending out a deafening clank of metal on metal. One of the pilots squeezed up beside her and fumbled for the controls to close the cargo hatch. He then clutched the dashboard, knuckles white, as the danger passed beneath with a sickening shriek.

Even with the ship sealed shut, and dozens of people screaming in fear, Molly could hear the explosion of plasteel crashing against the wall of the hangar bay, the small fleet of ruined craft completing their plummet with a mix of squeals and bangs.

In the distance—at the other end of the cavernous space—a square of blue sky beckoned, urging them to safety.

Molly raced for it, eager to oblige.

39

Cole toweled off his face and nodded as Arthur gave him some final pointers. By the end of their two-hour session, he had finally scored some deflections on Penny, who seemed equal parts annoyed and impressed by the accomplishment. Arthur was setting up a time for practice the following day, when Mortimor entered the training room.

"Might have to reschedule that," he said, interrupting their discussion.

"More people to meet?" Cole asked.

"You could say that. Or you could call it a field exercise. We're planning another raid for tomorrow—"

Arthur shook his head. "No can do, buddy. We've got one batch of fuel growing—it'll be a few days before it doubles."

"We're going to use most of it. We have no choice."

"More than *half?* But then it'll be a week before we get production back up."

"We don't have a week—"

"What are you guys talking about?" Cole asked.

The two men looked at each other. Arthur raised his eyebrows pleadingly. Mortimor hesitated, then shrugged.

"You said earlier that you knew what fusion fuel was," Arthur said.

"Yeah, a microorganism, right?" He tried to remember what Byrne had told him.

"Yeah, well, we breed them. Just like the Navy does, but our own variety." Arthur frowned. "The problem is, it takes quite a bit of time —"

"Time we don't have," Mortimor said. "Quite a few ships from the Bern fleet have already jumped out, and something massive popped into hyperspace last night and went through the rift as well. The thing was the size of a small moonlet. Our informant says Byrne flew the coop along with the craft, which means it might already be too late."

"Too late for what?" Cole asked.

Mortimor turned to Cole. "These Bern are invading the Milky Way. If we can't stop them, or close that rift, they'll extinguish every piece of sentient life they find there. Some of the people you see roaming these hallways are all that survived entire other galaxies. Unless we do something, *we* might be all that's left of ours."

"You've gotta be kidding." Cole looked to Arthur, as if he would tell him it was all a joke.

Arthur shook his head. "The frustrating bit is that the rift is *right*

there in that fleet somewhere, but we have no way of getting to it in order to close it."

"Wouldn't they just open another one, even if we did?"

Mortimor frowned. "Not from this side, they couldn't. What kills me is that *we* are the ones who opened the rift." He took a deep breath. "Over a decade ago, we opened a hole between Lok and hyperspace—"

"Well, not *we*, exactly," Arthur said.

"Right." Mortimor nodded. "The Drenard underground did, not too long before I became a member. They opened two rifts, both leading to hyperspace, one from our central part of the cone and another in the wide part, where the rain freezes."

He frowned. "It was a backdoor plan, a way to pull what they hoped would be a final raid, ending the deadlock here. They moved an entire army through in a single day. I was there for that part. My wife and I were staying in a house not long after Molly was born. An entire battalion came through one wall and disappeared into another. And then—"

Mortimor fell silent; Arthur shook his head, as if in empathy.

"And then what?" Cole asked.

"It's history," Mortimor said. He waved his hand, as if to brush away some lingering and awful memory. "The point is, when we—when *they*, the Underground, realized their attack had failed, they sealed the rifts, thinking that would be the end of it."

"Obviously not," said Cole.

"Yeah, well Ryke furthered his research from here and he realized these holes could be reopened from the other side—and with a normal hyperdrive, no less. To put it mildly, we got worried. Especially when we realized my wife, Parsona, had overhead enough in her fevered state to maybe put everything together—"

"When I found out about her," Arthur interrupted, "I explained how my memory retrieval system worked. There's the potential for total recall, even if it's implemented in a manner to simulate forgetfulness."

"And that's when we figured out how the Prophecy was going to take place," Mortimor said. "It explained the significance of Lok, at least. What we needed was *our* rift opened, the one near our headquarters, but Joshua and his men somehow beat us to it."

"So now what?" Cole asked. "They're invading Lok as we speak? That's what those black ships were? And that's where Molly is right now?"

"Yes. To all but the last, which I can't know. I hope she's a long way from whatever's going on out there."

"Well, why don't we just fly through the rift and close it from the

other side? You guys have ships, right?"

"Not really. Most of them don't survive coming here, not if they aren't adequately equipped beforehand. The ones that do usually end up in the snow, carried back into the cold and distant past. Besides, we wouldn't last a second against that fleet. They probably don't even see us as a threat. We're just a bunch of freedom fighters camped out in the rains."

"And Joshua's men? What do they have to do with this?"

"Well, they've been here a long time," Arthur said, "but their numbers really swelled when the war in Darrin popped up. Everyone jumping into that system met the asteroid fields and ended up here. Most of those characters fell in with Joshua's men, being a better match for their sick philosophy."

"Yeah, but *why* are they doing this?" Cole asked. "Why help the Bern invade our galaxy?"

"They've turned their anti-tech fanaticism into racism, even to the point of self-loathing," Arthur said.

"They see the Bern as perfect examples of themselves," Mortimor added. "They think by helping them, they'll expunge whatever it is that makes us different. They *want* whatever universe the Bern are concocting. Homogeneity is their goal. They've gone from hating everything humanity makes to hating humanity itself."

"So the plan is to put on some snow camouflage and jump over there with our swords? Duke it out with these guys and try and close the rift?"

"Not you," Arthur said. "We're gonna teach you to drive a hyper-skimmer so you can help pick up raiders after the attack. Everyone's getting shuffled around after our casualties from the last raid."

Mortimor narrowed his eyes and fixed them on Cole. "You think you've got a better idea, don't you? Listen, there's a lot you don't understand about this place. Navy tactics are useless, here. For one thing, we can't see this rift unless we're right on top of it. SADAR is pretty much blind with all the rain and snow. The best we can do is measure the overall size of their fleet and tell it's shrinking. So, if you think you've got a better plan—"

"A better plan? Hell *yeah* I've got a better plan. Screw jumping back to that village of theirs, let's jump on some of the Bern ships *before* they leave. We can close the rift from the other side, even without our own ships!"

Mortimor and Arthur looked at each other. Arthur started laughing first, Mortimor doing a better job of stifling it. "Just jump blind into a ship?" Arthur asked. "Son, what makes you think you'd hit open space? Look, this isn't like jumping *through* hyperspace, we're *in* it!"

“What he means,” Mortimor said, placing a hand on Arthur’s shoulder, “is that there’s no place left to bounce to.”

Arthur laughed. “Yeah, that clears it up—”

“Wait.” Cole held up his hands. “One at a time,” he said.

“Okay,” Arthur said, beating Mortimor to it. “Let’s say you jump into one of their ships and you meet a bulkhead. Well, you’re gonna have a bulkhead bisecting your body when you’re done. We don’t even take a chance on our raids, even though we have a visual. We jump in a meter or two off the deck and roll. And you can feel a burn from every snowflake you absorb.”

“You have a visual?”

Mortimor waved Arthur off. “We have *sources*,” Mortimor said.

“What about jumping bombs in?”

“You got any bombs? They’re rarer than fusion fuel since the war. Hell, we’ve tried jumping random things in where we thought the cockpits would be, but it’s like throwing darts in the dark. The only thing we could see we were doing was running low on fuel and getting no results. The stuff is precious, and the denser the object, the more you use. Jumping metal really eats the stuff up.”

“What about jumping cameras in and sending shots back and using that?”

Mortimor frowned and shook his head. Cole could tell he was getting annoyed, but he couldn’t stop thinking about what the Seer had said: that he would find a way out of hyperspace…

“There’s no way to transmit real-time coordinates,” Mortimor told him. “The best you could do is know a place that *used* to be safe, and even then, the only thing reliable out here seems to be longwave radio. Look, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we’ve gone through all these ideas for years. We’ve wasted liters of precious fuel trying every trick in the book. If there was a way, we would’ve thought of it by—”

“I’ve got it!” said Cole.

Mortimor held up his hands, trying to calm him down.

But before he could, Cole launched into his idea, gesturing wildly with his arms, waving schematics in the air, pausing to slap Arthur on the back.

The two older men fell silent, listening. Then grinning. Then smiling at each other, nodding.

40

Parsona crouched down on her landing gear, her hatch already opening. Scottie had directed Molly to a small clearing in a wide forest a few hundred kilometers from Bekkie. While *Parsona's* strained thrusters cooled, the cramped passengers exploded out into the fresh air where they took turns consoling and comforting each other; the sounds of their frustrated sobs wormed their way through the cargo bay and into the cockpit. Molly pulled on her helmet, shutting out the horrible reminders of what she'd just been through.

"Mom?"

"Sweetheart, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Molly looked down at the stains across her chest, feeling anything *but* fine. "I'm sorry to keep you—"

"Nonsense. And no apologies. I—that was some amazing flying back there. How are those people holding up?"

"I'm not sure yet." Molly looked over her shoulder at the thinning crowd in the bay. Cat was helping people climb out of the cargo pods recessed in the floor, and she could see Walter making his way forward, ushering several people ahead of himself. "I'm gonna go check on them. I'll talk to you later—I just wanted to let you know I was okay."

And I wanted to hear your voice, Molly added to herself.

"I love you," her mom said.

Molly was too choked-up to respond. She pulled off her helmet and dropped it in the nav seat. The Wadi jumped after it, crawling through the open visor and curling up inside. Molly was about to get out of her seat when Walter entered the cockpit. She reached for him, pulled him over the control console and buried her head in his flightsuit. And she sobbed. She cried, as much in relief as in sadness. The dam of responsibility—that wall holding back her grief and horror—it ruptured, flooding her at once with all the tragedy of that day.

"It'sss okay," Walter told her, holding her with one arm and patting her hair. Molly felt the Wadi return, crawling to her shoulder and wrapping itself around her neck.

"It'sss okay," Walter said again.

It took a moment to get herself together. She felt embarrassed by the display and sat back in her chair, wiping her face. "I'm sorry," she told Walter, looking at the wet patch of tears on his shoulder and the smear of red below.

"Don't worry about it." He looked back through the cargo bay. "I need to go. I want to keep an eye on them."

Molly laughed. “If you’re worried about them looting—don’t.”

Walter looked back at her, his mouth firmly set and his eyes wide. “I need to make ssure they’re *okay*,” he said.

He padded aft and ran back through the galley. Molly and the Wadi stared at one another, shocked into silence and disbelief.

••••

The scene that awaited her outside was a mix of triage and refugee camp. The only serious wounds, of course, were psychological, but these were no less likely to make a victim prone than the physical variety. Molly moved among the survivors, a new flightsuit ridding her of the external stains, leaving only the other kind within her. As she looked for people to tend to, she was amazed at how many of the crewmen were already working to care for the rest, losing themselves in the ability to help another.

She approached Cat, who was spreading some of the blankets from *Parsona’s* crew bunks out across the forest floor. She touched her shoulder and Cat turned. The two women frowned at each other, eyes glazed over with tears. They hugged, the power in Cat’s arms squeezing out some of the painful stress in Molly’s back. The touch of another, even as the embrace with Walter had shown, gave her hope that she could get over the things she’d seen, could summit the awfulness and perhaps rappel safely down the other side.

“You did good, kiddo,” Cat whispered.

They separated and Molly looked away, rubbing at the bottom of her eyes.

“Where’s Scottie?” Molly asked. “Is he doing okay? Urg—I’m the one who told him to keep looking for—”

“Stop that.” Cat turned her around and held Molly’s shoulders. “Don’t do that. He was doing what he had to. There’s bad luck involved, you’ve gotta remember that.”

Molly nodded, but only to last thing Cat said. She bent over and grabbed two of the blanket’s corners and helped spread it out over the dried leaves and broken twigs. Several crewmen immediately helped others sit down, each of them cradling a cup, bottle, or a mug of water. One of the crewmen—an older woman Molly remembered from the simulator room—tugged on Molly’s elbow and pointed over to a cluster of seated figures.

“The Admiral wants to see you,” the lady said.

Molly turned to Cat. “Be loose with the water. I’ll make a run into Bekkie tonight and top up the tank and load up with food. Don’t let anyone set up camp too close to the thruster wash.”

Cat nodded and gave her arm a squeeze.

Molly took a deep breath and marched over to the small circle where Saunders seemed to be conferring with a group of higher-ups. They fell silent as she approached, their wrinkled eyes swiveling around to watch her. She felt ridiculous standing there, on display, so she sank down to the blanket, and everyone adjusted to make room.

"Admiral." She gave him a somber look, which took little effort given how she felt.

Saunders glanced around at the others, almost as if on the verge of dismissing them. The gray gentleman—the one from the hallway of the StarCarrier—looked at her warmly, the corners of his mouth curling up.

After an uncomfortable moment, Saunders extended his hand to Molly. She gave it a long look, then grasped it with her own.

"This isn't a pardon, not by any stretch. It's just a thanks. We'll deal with the rest after—"

"There won't be an after," she interrupted.

The small gathering tensed up at the breach of protocol, several of them moving to say something. Molly spread her hands, gesturing to the pathetic encampment forming throughout the clearing. "*This* is the after," she said.

"Nonsense," one of the staff members interjected. "We've knocked the Drenards back before, we'll do it again!"

"These aren't the Drenards." Molly turned to take them all in.

"Not the Drenards?" Someone asked. "Do you have any idea what—?"

Saunders held up his hands. He looked past the group and toward the rest of the survivors. "Let's stay calm," he told everyone.

Molly followed his gaze. She saw dozens of faces pointing their direction from the blankets scattered across the forest floor. They were shocked faces, scared faces, watching and waiting. Her sense of being on display heightened even further.

"The Drenards began pushing out of their spiral arm a week ago," Saunders said.

Molly turned back and saw he was addressing her.

"They've only hit frontier planets so far. Regan, Osis, a few others. As I told you before, and as you can now see, your parents chose unwisely to side with them."

"Unwisely?" someone asked, winning a glare from the gray man beside Saunders.

Molly let out a sigh. She turned to take them all in. "Admiral. Everyone. These are *not* Drenards. I know for a fact. I—"

"How could you know?" one of the younger officers asked. "And why should we believe her anyway," he asked the others. "You do

know we came here to find *you*, right? None of this would've happened if it weren't for you!"

Molly gaped at the young officer; his eyes flared with rage.

"Carlton, you're dismissed."

The young man turned to Saunders. "Sir, I'm sorry, it's just that __"

"I said you're dismissed, son. Go tend to the others."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as he'd gone, Molly turned to the Admiral. "Is that true? You came here because—it's my fault that you—?"

Saunders waved her off. "Of course not. I mean—that this is your fault. The fleet's defeat was mine. And don't flatter yourself too much. One of the fleets had to check in on Lok. We hadn't heard from them for over two weeks. I volunteered Zebra so we could pull double-duty, just in case you'd come home. We were expecting Drenard hostilities when we jumped in, just nothing like…"

He fell silent, and Molly shook her head.

"If they aren't Drenards, what are they?" one of the officers asked. "Don't tell me the Tchung are back from wherever they—"

"They're called the Bern," she whispered. "They're coming from another galaxy—"

"Hogwash!"

"Silence," Saunders told the group. "Go on," he said to Molly.

She cleared her throat and glanced at the cup of water the gray man clutched in his thin fingers. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He handed her the cup. "Captain Robinson, by the way."

"Thank you," Molly said, taking a gulp. She handed the cup back to him. "They call themselves the Bern, and they come from another galaxy. There's a rift here on Lok. It's what my parents uncovered. I *think*. Anyway, I know they were working to prevent this. The Drenards—"

Molly glanced over at Robinson, whose brow seemed knitted with worry.

"And the Drenards?" Saunders asked.

"The uh… the Drenards…"

"More water?" Robinson asked, extending the cup to her.

"Uh…" Molly looked to Saunders. She glanced once more at all the faces turned her way. "Sir? Can I have a word with you in private?"

••••

Saunders leaned against *Parsona's* workbench. He had his arms folded over and resting atop his belly while Molly fumbled around in one of the cabinets. She finally brought out a bundle wrapped in a towel.

"What's going on?" Saunders asked her. "Anything you want to tell me, you can say in front of my staff."

"That's the thing," Molly said. She stood up and placed the bundle on the workbench. "I don't think I can. Hear me out, and I mean *really* hear me out, just let it sink in before you react. I think these people that attacked you—I think they've been trying to get here for a long time. There's a rift on Lok they're coming through, and another one somewhere in the Drenard arm. I'm pretty sure the Drenards have been guarding that rift, preventing anything from coming out of it."

"A rift?"

"Yeah. I mean, I don't know what to call it, I'm not a scientist, but I do know what they look like. I saw the first ships come out of the one here on Lok. Walter and I were hiding in the woods nearby, making sure the escape pod was secure, when—"

Saunders pointed up. "You saw these ships come out of a rift?"

"Yeah."

"And you didn't tell anyone? Didn't contact the Navy?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone on Lok saw them. They've been flying overhead for weeks and gathering in orbit. It hasn't been a secret. And then the big one came through, and everyone thought *that* one—"

"Wait, go back to the Drenards. Why the bloodshed if they're supposedly protecting us?"

"I didn't say they were protecting *us*, they're protecting the entire galaxy. That's why they never push the war past their arm. Why they just defend their territory."

Saunders rubbed his face. "That's nonsense. Why wouldn't they just *tell* us? And your little theory falls apart now that they *are* pushing out and attacking our planets."

Molly thought about that. "Maybe it's because the Bern are attacking here," she said. "Maybe they're looking for the other rift, or something."

It sounded horrible, even to her own ears, like Cole trying to rationalize one of his theories by fitting the data to his bias.

"The timing sure is strange," Saunders admitted. "Unless this is just a two-pronged attack—"

"Look at this," Molly said, picking up the bundle and unwrapping it. "And don't be freaked out, it's not human."

He stepped back, despite the warning. Byrne's arm looked

extremely lifelike; the flesh hadn't even discolored. Saunders took it and immediately looked at the interior, which was neatly cut and seemingly made of some alloy with a few bits of detail, like metal piping and wires.

"What is this?"

"It's the arm of a Bern, but my—I know someone who thinks they might not all be like this, that most of them are flesh and blood, just like you and me." She grabbed the towel from him, then looked around. "Where's the other one?"

"You have two of these?"

"Somewhere. I—well, the rest of the guy is in hyperspace for all I know. And this is why I don't feel comfortable telling your staff about everything, and also why the Drenards couldn't tell us about the rift. The Bern look just like us. They've probably infiltrated our Navy, even our government. I mean, this might be the only reason that we keep attacking the Drenards."

"Flank me." Saunders set the arm on the workbench and staggered to the center of the cargo bay. He looked outside before turning back to Molly. His jowls were sagging, his mouth open. "It makes perfect sense."

"It does?"

He pointed at the arm, crossed back over and picked it up. "You've seen one of them?"

Molly nodded.

"And they look like us?"

"A lot."

"I—" Saunders looked around the cargo bay. "There's nobody else aboard, is there?"

Molly couldn't help but glance at the cargo cam.

"Just us," she said.

"We've been getting some weird orders lately. And there's been a ton of sealed communiqués between interfleet staff, stuff I can't even access. Then Alpha fleet was called out of Earth orbit and sent to—*Flank!* They're defenseless. Earth—I how could I be so *stupid?* We need to get to a long-range radio. We need to—"

"And call *who?*" Molly asked. "Don't you see the problem? Call a Bern, and you'll get yourself killed. Call a human, and you'll start a panic and get *everyone* killed. Trust me, I was in the same place as you not that long ago. Hell, you're coming around faster than I did."

"Your parents knew this, didn't they?"

Molly nodded. They *know* this, she thought, but kept that secret to herself.

"I feel so idiotic. It never occurred to me that orders could be questioned. You obey, right? How many kids did I teach to obey? Oh,

gods, the Academy. I—”

Saunders fell silent; his face went white, his fat, rosy cheeks turning to ash. Molly reached out for him as he stumbled forward, his eyes becoming unfocused. She grunted with effort, catching him under his arms and guiding him gently to the ground.

“Admiral? Saunders, are you okay?”

He didn’t respond. She reached up and grabbed the towel from the counter, placing it under his head, then ran for some water. The ship’s collection of assorted cups and mugs were completely gone, so she held a clean rag under the faucet, then twisted most of the moisture out of it. She ran back to Saunders and draped it across his forehead.

“Sir, are you okay?”

He blinked several times before his eyes gradually came together, focusing on Molly’s face. He looked up at her in shock, his pupils twitching back and forth between hers.

“Lucin—”

“I’m sorry?” Molly leaned closer and dabbed the cloth across his forehead.

“Lucin,” he said, his face contorting into something between nausea and fear.

“What about him?” Molly asked, but the answer started coming as Saunders whispered his name again.

“Lucin—”

It was all he could say.

“Lucin…”

Over and over.

41

Cole whipped his head forward, snapping the welding mask in place and causing the world around him to fall black as blindness. He pulled the torch's trigger and a blast of plasma illuminated his workspace in an eerie, greenish glow. Popping a few dollops of steel at a time, he worked along the joint and tacked the sheet of metal into place. Once it held, he ran back the length of the seam with a steady burn of the flame, concentrating on making a good, strong connection. Behind the torch's passing, he left a long bead of beautiful, red, puddling steel.

The weld complete, he shut down the torch, lifted his visor, and watched the molten alloy cool—the rivulets of lava turning gray and then a dull silver. Cole stood up. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and surveyed the nearly completed box. On the opposite side of the cage, two other workers finished the wiring as they secured the last connection between the grav panels and the three separate power supplies. Cole nodded to one of the men who kept glancing up to survey his work, then moved to the next joint that needed welding. He was just about to flip his visor back down when a voice like dripping honey interrupted him:

"I hear you came up with this."

Cole turned. Penny stood behind him, her hair as bright as liquid steel.

"Yeah," Cole said, beaming. "Ryke said I get lifetime clever points for this."

Penny pouted. "*If* it works." She appraised the box skeptically, one hand perched on her hip, the other reaching out to touch a vertical strut. "You actually think anyone's gonna risk their lives in one of these things?"

"Are you kidding?" Cole smiled at her. "It's flawless. C'mere, step inside." He ducked under one strut and stepped over another, entering the cage of steel. Penny followed. She even accepted Cole's proffered hand and allowed him to steady her as she crawled through. When they stood up, they found themselves in a box just two meters on a side, divided in half by two solid walls of steel, pressed up together. Cole's head had just enough clearance to stand upright.

"A little tight to jump inside of," Penny said.

"We'll be balled up, hugging our legs. Besides, we shouldn't have more than one person in them at a time. Here's how it works." He slapped the solid walls standing vertically in the center of the box. "You've got two steel plates facing each other, right? At the moment, they're just tacked in place with a few spot welds. There's grav panels

in each one, just like the panels in a ship's decking."

He reached up and traced the wires coming off the panels. "Everything's wired in parallel and with three separate power sources, just in case the box jumps in the middle of something. But even if they do, a single cell from any of the battery banks should still have enough juice to drive the plates away from each other."

"What if the grav plates jump in the middle of something?"

"It won't matter," Cole said. "That's how they're built in a ship's decking, anyway." He slapped the steel wall. "Besides, that's the whole point of the design. We can't jump inside a ship, because there might be something in the way. However, if these puppies become *one* with something else, they'll drag all that material apart once the grav panels fire. It'll create an empty box, no matter what it hits. And *that's* what we'll be jumping inside of a few seconds later."

"I'm with you so far. The box jumps in, the grav panels engage, the plates fly apart and drag open a cube of empty space. You jump in a second later… so now you're inside a box of solid steel. What next?"

Cole put his hands together and swished a perfect third angle attack. "We pop our swords, cut our way out, and take care of the crew."

Penny ran her fingers back through her hair and surveyed the structure thoughtfully. She turned and looked Cole up and down. "You thought of this?"

"Don't sound so surprised," he said, grinning. "Though, I do think I had some help."

"Yeah? Ryke, right? This is totally his sort of thing."

"No, I think it was from the training." Cole grabbed his imaginary sword and slashed at her with an angle-two. "Repulsion," he said, smiling.

"More like *attraction*," said Penny, stepping close. She reached around Cole, her face approaching his.

"I, uh—"

"This is wired wrong," Penny whispered. She pursed her lips, then grinned at him coyly before stepping away.

Cole turned, blushing. He looked down at the wiring harness behind him. The leads from the grav panels were reversed, the polarity completely backward. The panels wouldn't have flown apart —they would've been permanently locked together! He looked around for a screwdriver to loosen the terminals, then decided to bend down and check one of the other two battery feeds.

Same thing.

Cole glanced around the workshop to see if anyone was watching. As he contemplated the chances of wiring two panels backward, he felt a chill run up his spine, the hairs on the back of his neck tingling

with danger. He turned to tell Penny, but the workshop's double doors were already swaying back and forth from her departure. He looked around for Ryke, who had just been supervising another welder, when he saw the two workers in the neighboring cage peering up at him.

Cole looked away, then he realized what they were working on: another wiring harness.

"Hey—" Cole said, standing up.

The duo reacted as if shots had been fired. They took off, running toward the double doors leading out of the workshop. Cole crawled out of the cage and gave chase. One of the workers shoved open the doors as the other man turned, his arm a blur. Something glinted in the fluorescent lights, twinkling as it spun through the air. Cole felt the impact on his chin before any of it fully registered. A loud crack reverberated through his skull. He fell to the ground, dazed, as an adjustable power wrench clanged to the floor beside him.

Cole tasted blood in his mouth, could feel the laceration along the inside of his lip like a swollen ridge of tenderness. He shook his head clear, grabbed the wrench, and scampered to his feet. Stumbling forward a few steps—his legs still resistant to keeping the rest of him upright—he shouldered open the workshop doors, one of which slammed into someone on the other side.

"What in the hell?"

Doctor Ryke came into view as the door snapped shut. His annoyed expression moved from the men running down the hallway to settle on Cole.

"You boys need to—"

"Stop them!" Cole yelled to the handful of aliens milling through the hallway. He brushed past Ryke and gave chase as the two Humans disappeared around a corner. Cole ran as fast as his wobbly legs could take him. He skidded around the corner, caroming off a spinning Mortimor, who looked even more annoyed than Ryke.

"Watch where you're—"

"Sabotage!" Cole yelled, pointing. He tried to think of the word for the *people* committing the act, but his head was even less clear than his legs were sturdy. He pushed away from Mortimor and continued to run awkwardly, his arms windmilling, his grasp furious on the power wrench. Two aliens came out of a doorway, and Cole nearly plowed them over; he brushed against the hallway wall and took the next corner too fast, bouncing off an open door. He pounded his feet as fast as he could as the men ahead slowed to round another corner.

"Stop them!" he yelled once more, but the motley group ahead just turned from one curiosity to the other, everyone frozen by the spectacle of the footrace. Cole weaved through them, pushing aliens

twice his size out of his way as he turned the next corner.

There was no sign of the men in the next hallway, but a smattering of gawkers turned from a closing door to look at him. Cole traced their bemused glares back to the door. He ran to it, pushed through, and found himself in a stairwell, could hear the rapid slap of descending feet below. He hurried down after, swallowing more blood as he slipped and slid down the steps.

He was a flight down when he heard a door slam shut, leaving the stairwell ringing with just his footfalls. The next landing was the last. Cole jumped past the last few steps and shoved his way through the door, suddenly remembering having come that way the day before. When he staggered into the skimmer garage, he wasn't surprised. His trip to the Seer had begun and ended there. Nor was he surprised to see the hatch pulling shut on one of the vehicles, its engine whining as it slid down the ramp and toward the door, which led to the open, wet world beyond.

Cole hurled his wrench as hard as he could, a seemingly futile expression of his anger. It flew like a missile, his very hand making a whirring sound as it parted the air before him in a blur of augmented elbow. The momentum of his own limb threw him off balance, causing him to stagger forward as the wrench exploded through the rear of the hyperskimmer. The impact made a deafening crack, and the skimmer swerved to the side, crunching against the wall of the ramp as it continued to trundle along.

Cole stumbled ahead, regaining his balance as he ran past the other parked skimmers. He prepared himself to race down the ramp after the fleeing saboteurs—*that's what they were called*—to chase them down and jump on the canopy if he had to. He was nearly to the top of the ramp when an alarm rang out and red lights began to flash, almost as if warning him of how bad an idea he'd just had. With a panicked stutter, Cole remembered what the alarms signified and cursed himself.

He looked around quickly for a locker or a storage bin as the alarm continued to blare, signaling the garage door was about to open. He squeezed between two of the parked skimmers, then caught a glimpse of a pair of goggles resting on the dash of the nearest skimmer, inside the closed canopy.

With a loud groan, the garage door at the bottom of the ramp began to open. Its chain ratcheted up with a staccato noise, letting in a harsh stream of unrelenting, blinding, photons.

Cole grimaced in pain at the brief exposure. He shut his eyes and folded the crook of his arm over his face. He'd only caught a glimpse of the light, but it was enough to spot the darkness behind his lids. Reaching to the side, he groped for the fender of the nearby skimmer

and found it, then patted along the hull until he reached the canopy. Cole fumbled for the release. He felt it and pulled the lever as the departing skimmer whined high and roared out into hyperspace.

Picturing the location of the goggles behind his shut eyelids, Cole leaned far over the edge of the open canopy and brushed his hand across the dash, feeling for them. He hit them with the side of his hand and knocked them off and onto the floorboard. Cursing again, Cole stretched out and fumbled for them across the skimmer's floor. Suddenly, his feet slipped off the deck and he went head-first into the passenger seat, landing awkwardly.

Cole kept his eyes squeezed tight as he untangled himself. He reached down by his feet and patted for the goggles. Finally, he found them. He brought the cups to his eyes as he righted himself in the skimmer's seat. Working the rubber strap into place, Cole peered ahead for his quarry, but the other skimmer was gone. He looked to the door, wondering why someone wasn't coming along to help, to give chase. Then he saw the pale glow of a red light flashing above the door. A door that would remain locked for safety reasons until the garage was shut tight against the photons.

"Damnit!" Cole looked to the skimmer dash, trying to recall which switch opened and closed the garage door. He traced his finger over the canopy release, remembered which one had operated the docking claws at the Seer's cabin, saw the wiper knob, then came to the ignition switch.

Cole's brain spun with more bad ideas, his poor judgment clicking along in defiance of the alarms and flashing lights. He thought about the time it would take to close and open the garage door, how long to explain what was going on, how much longer to organize pursuit. The idiotic plan hadn't even made a full circuit through his boyish glands before his finger depressed the ignition switch, powering the grav cells in the rear of the skimmer. Cole keyed the canopy shut and adjusted himself in the seat, familiarizing himself with the control stick and taking the time to finally locate the garage door controls.

As soon as the canopy clicked into place, Cole pushed forward on the stick, jolting the sleek vehicle toward the ramp. The sudden burst of speed nearly made the back end of the skimmer whip around. Rather than let up and correct, he gave it even more juice and rocketed forward, the craft briefly leaving the deck as it raced over the edge of the ramp and down. Cole yelped. He dug one hand into the dash as he piloted with the other. He only barely remembered to hit the garage door controls as he raced out into the wet world and driving rain.

Sliding across the film of water outside, Cole's skimmer kicked up low walls of spray as he scanned the horizon for his prey. Behind him,

the metal door to the lumbering headquarters slammed shut, sealing out the light. Inside, alarms would be falling silent, the light above the door ceasing its steady flashes. Cole could imagine the stairwell door bursting open, an annoyed and confused group of freedom fighters stumbling through and wondering what in hyperspace was going on.

He tried not to think of that. It was too late to go back. He peered ahead at the spray from the other skimmer, standing out on the featureless landscape. It rose in a watery bloom and shivered against the ash-white sky, easy to pick out. Cole pushed forward on the control stick and raced off after it, two walls of water forming on either side of him as he gained speed.

As his craft moved up to the surface of the muddy water, the back end of his skimmer swayed side to side. Cole fought to keep it under control. The steering was much more sensitive to overcorrection than a Firehawk's. The vehicle's foils seemed to carve through the water like skis: biting, sliding, and weaving. Each movement begged for a countering one, and it took several moments before he figured out the timing, how to *go* with the flow rather than fight it. He found large, smooth motions worked better than the fast-twitch variety suited for spacecraft. As he gained some semblance of control, Cole looked up and saw he'd fallen off course. He veered to the side, lining up with the speeding skimmer in the distance. With the accelerator pinned, he chased off after it, steadily gaining.

As he got closer, he saw why he was able to catch up: trailing off the fleeing craft was a tight plume of gray smoke, his furious wrench toss obviously having hit something important. Cole activated the windshield wipers. Even though he traveled the same direction as the rain, his skimmer was going much faster, so the sideways droplets smacked the canopy as surely as if they were falling straight down.

Cole hardly breathed as he powered down the smooth wake created by the other skimmer. He pulled within a dozen meters, and *still* the wounded craft ahead maintained its unwavering course. Cole glanced over his shoulder at his own limited visibility. A wall of kicked-up water loomed to either side and a haze of spray occluded what little glass lay behind him. The vehicles were fast, but driven in near blindness. Only a narrow chute of visibility lay ahead, and even *that* was filled with nonstop rain.

Cole looked to the dash. An array of sensors, chart plotters, and readouts reminded him of the hyperskimmer's primary function: to find body heat and pull people out of the snow. For all he knew, the things drove like a dream on the ice-covered portions of hyperspace for which they'd been designed. He matched the speed of the craft ahead and scanned the dash once more, wondering if there was anything he could use to stop them—perhaps a radio to alert HQ—but

none of the controls were labeled, and he'd only seen a few used during his trip to see the Seer.

The Seer!

Cole looked over the switches again, finding the one he recognized. He focused on the tail of the other skimmer and powered his own craft forward, deep into the plume of gray smoke and the shower of watery spray. Piloting with one hand, Cole kept his other one poised on the switch while he visualized the maneuver. He took a few deep breaths before pulling to within a mere meter of the racing craft, the world outside disappearing in a wall of kicked-up and solid white foam. He had a brief moment of terror that the pilot ahead might suddenly slow down, but shook such thoughts aside.

Cole whipped out of the craft's wake, moving into clear air and uncut water. He gave the skimmer everything it had, his shoulders pressing back into his chair as he jolted forward. Pulling up beside the other craft, Cole looked to the side, but saw nothing through the wall of water kicked up from the forward foil. He swerved that direction anyway, his finger on the switch tense with anticipation. As soon as he heard the crunch of metal-on-metal, he hit the button, sending the docking arms out through the wall of water. He heard another crunch as the grippers found something solid to bite into.

Cole pulled back on his throttle, powering his own skimmer down and hoping to bring the other craft to a halt. The locked ships veered to one side as the other craft, clearly wounded, tried to keep running. Cole corrected for the drag as the neighboring engine whined loudly in complaint. He could practically *feel* the vibrations as the other pilot attempted to flee, but the weight and power of his craft were far too much for it.

As their speed fell, the two ships sank deeper into the water, and the wall of spray between them fell like a dropped sheet. Cole peered through his canopy, expecting to see a shocked expression on the passenger's face—a look of resigned defeat.

What he found instead, as the hydrofoils ceased kicking up so much spray, was an open canopy next to his own. One of the saboteurs knelt in his seat, leaning out over the side of his skimmer toward Cole. He had his hands up, as if holding something, but they looked perfectly empty.

It wasn't until the man swung his arms down in a perfect angle two that Cole realized what he was holding.

42

After Molly helped Saunders recover from his collapse in the cargo bay, she watched him return to his inner circle to think about what she had divulged. She spent her time likewise, resting in her cabin and dwelling on the possibility that Lucin had been more than just a turncoat to her. Had he been a Bern as well? If so, what did that explain? When he said he meant to end the war, had he ever stated what side he imagined as the victor? Or even which war he meant?

She listened to the washer in the bathroom thud rhythmically as it attempted to get the blood out of a dozen flightsuits. It sounded like her ship had grown a pulse. It even had the double beat of one: thud-thud. Thud-thud.

If Lucin had been a traitor to them all, what a wonderful post for him to have infiltrated. He always said the Naval Academies on either side were the true front lines for any war, lines the enemy could never attack. But what didn't make sense was how effective he was at producing capable fighters. Or how he never tried to stoke up anti-Drenard rage the way Saunders had. More disguises, perhaps?

Molly tried to put a stop to the cycle of her thoughts. The questions went round and round, tormenting her, never making any sense. She forced herself to sit up, fearing her attempt at rest was simply winding her up more tightly. Instead, she went outside to find Saunders, to see if he was doing any better than she at coming to grips with these slippery issues.

She found him by one of the many small campfires flickering beyond the tangle of wiry, Lokian trees. His group seemed to be in the middle of an animated conversation as she approached, but they quickly fell silent as she stepped into the fire's wavering pool of light. Saunders rose from the blanket to meet her. He squeezed her shoulder and pulled her away from the cluster of staff members.

"How're you feeling?" she whispered.

Saunders shook his head. "I'm dancing a fine line, I think. It's… just too much all at once." He stopped and patted his flightsuit. Another of the survivors had given him a rare clean one, but it didn't quite fit. The zipper remained open almost to his waist, revealing a sweat-stained undershirt beneath. "Before I forget—" Saunders pulled out a credit chip and passed it to Molly. "It draws from a Navy account. Use it for the supplies tomorrow and put a deposit on some place for us to stay."

Molly took the chip and slid it into a pocket, zipping it up afterwards. "You sure you don't want to come with us?" she asked. "It would be nice to have you there to throw your weight around."

Saunders looked down at himself, then peered up at Molly, the barest of smirks visible in the wan light of the campfires.

"I totally didn't mean it like that," she said.

Saunders laughed, or tried to. The strain and tiredness in him were more evident as he fought to hide them. "Sure you didn't," he said. "And I don't think you need my help to pick up some food and water. You've got plenty of capable hands. I'd rather be with my crew."

"How about one of your staff?" Molly asked. "It'd be nice to have a badge to wave around in order to secure some rooms. Bekkie is packed, what with the elections."

"Damn. I forgot about the elections. They're still gonna be held with all this going on?"

"Are you kidding?" Molly nodded up at the sky. "They absolutely love the chaos those ships are creating. It gives them something to promise they can fix. I guarantee you your fleet is a plank in a platform right now. The Liberty party is probably saying the Freedom party shot down the Firehawks on purpose, making their war platform more enticing."

Saunders shook his head. "I wish I could accuse you of exaggerating, but politics back at the GN haven't been much better. As for taking one of my staff with you, who do you trust?"

Molly glanced back to his group by the fire. The problem of who to trust seemed intractable—it haunted her at every turn. "Alright, I see your point. I'll try and find whatever lodging I can, and I'll pick up some more comfortable clothes. Hopefully we can shuttle you guys to town later in the day, even if it takes a few shifts."

"Sounds good. We were just discussing amongst ourselves the best course of action—"

"Wait. You didn't tell them—?"

"No." Saunders shook his head. "I just said we can be sure it isn't Drenards, but that we know little else about them. A few officers want to call in reinforcements, but the rest of us point out how futile a defense our fleet had put up. Whatever they hit us with, it controlled local gravity, and we were powerless to overcome it. So the general consensus is that our position and numbers have turned us into an intelligence gathering force, not a fighting one. We'll set up something permanent here on Lok—"

"*Permanent*?" Molly looked around at the spread of blankets and huddling groups of survivors. "No offense, but you don't really think this is a force of any kind, do you? These people are refugees. A crew without a fleet. I think you guys should hunker down until whatever happens blows over, maybe try and contact their families—"

"Families? Refugees? These people are still serving in the Navy,

Molly. And Cristine—Lieutenant Daniels—her family was on Osis, which has already been ravaged. Hell, we might be at ground zero for what's to come. We need to make a plan—" Saunders pulled her further into the woods and lowered his voice. "You might be the only person I can trust right now."

"Yeah, but—"

"It'll eventually be up to us, you and me, to decide if we risk calling this in." Saunders looked back toward the campfire. "I'm using a ton of doublespeak with my staff. Hell, you've got me so paranoid, every cough and whisper from them has me doubting who I can trust."

"I'm sorry. And you're right. The thing is, I can't stick around and help. I was kinda working on something when—well, before you showed up." She only barely stopped herself from saying *crashed the party*, thereby sticking her foot in her mouth a second time.

"I'm sorry, but whatever it was, it'll have to wait. We need your ship until we can secure some of our own."

Molly took a step back. "I can't do that." She shook her head.

Saunders held up both hands. "Hey, I'm not going to force you. We called a truce, remember?"

"So don't tell me it'll have to wait."

Saunders glanced up at the straggly canopy overhead. He spread his arms to indicate the hasty encampment. "What could possibly be more important than this?"

"It's… *personal*," Molly said.

"Well, maybe I can help. Once this blows over, of course."

"I don't think so. Besides, I'm gonna have to do some illegal stuff to get it done."

"What kind of illegal stuff?" Saunders asked stiffly.

"Wouldn't you rather not know?"

"No, I'd rather you not do it. Now, what is it?"

"Out the airlock," Molly said.

"Absolutely."

She took a step closer and glanced around before she spoke. "My dad might be alive."

"Mortimor?"

Molly took another step closer, shushing him.

"Mortimor Fyde?" Saunders hissed.

"Yeah. He's… well, trapped in hyperspace. That's where his ship —*this* ship—has been all these years. I've been trying to track some people down for a few weeks, and as soon as I found them, you guys showed up. I need to get back on track, *if* they'll help me after what happened to Urg."

"Urg. That's the guy the pilots were talking about? The one that

helped find and rescue them?"

"Yeah. He's—he's with a group of illicit fusion fuelers. They have a blend that supposedly can get me to hyperspace and back. The drive in my ship isn't normal, it seems. That's what my parents were working on."

Saunders rubbed his chin. "That fits with your parents' file. They were sent here to track down a source of fuel, and then supposedly uncovered the Drenard Underground. Once they learned what you've told me about the rift, not to mention the real nature of the war, they must've thrown in with them."

"Boy, I'd like to see that file," Molly said.

"I'd like to take another look at it myself. I bet everything in there reads completely different to me, now." Saunders looked at her for a moment, frowning. "So when were you planning on taking this jaunt to hyperspace? And what does that even entail? What would this place be like? A vacuum, or something?"

"No. It's not like that. It's more like a planet, only weirder. My mo — a friend tried to explain it to me, but I can't make sense of it."

"You're going soon?"

"I don't know. I have to get some of this fuel first, and it sounds like there's not much to go around. To everyone else, it's just workable fusion that you guys don't control. I need to really sit down and speak with Scottie about it."

"I'd like to speak to him as well," Saunders said, his eyes narrowing.

"You said you'd take this out the airlock!"

"Okay. Fine. But no leaving until we get these people supplied and settled—"

"Of course. I'll handle that in the morning. And if I have my way, I'll be jumping out of here around this time tomorrow night."

Saunders scratched his chin. "I don't suppose I can demand any more than that. Just so you know, though, I think the Bern threat is more important than your haste to find your father. If we could get rid of them, it would also put an end to the attacks from the Drenards. The entire pretense for their offensive, their drive to stop the Bern attack, it would no longer make any sense. Billions of lives would be saved."

"I agree with the tactical assessment, but I don't see how my staying is much help. I don't see how *any* of us can stop this."

"You might be right, but I feel compelled to try *something*. And perhaps I'm wrong to see you and your ship as two of our greatest assets." Saunders looked past her at the scattered campfires. "All I need to do now is figure out how to destroy a fleet that made mincemeat out of mine and do it with a hundred staff members that

are closer to retirement than their last active combat duty."

Molly laughed. "Now you're talking crazy."

"Hell, isn't this the kind of crap you lived for in the simulators?"

"I guess so," Molly said. "But none of that was real."

"Yeah?" Saunders's face drooped, sadness and fatigue pulling down on it as his false humor rested for a moment. "Well, nothing about *this* situation feels real, either."

••••

Molly walked Saunders back to his group, then wandered toward *Parsona*, stopping along the way to help a group string a tarp between some trees. She recognized the faded blue plastic—it had been folded up in a corner of the engine room as long ago as Palan. The string was also hers, and the small group of survivors were quick to thank her for everything she'd done. She nodded politely in response to their effusive gratitude and made her way toward the ship.

The brief interaction put her in a somber mood as she thought about leaving those people to rush off to hyperspace. In the back of her mind, she toyed with crazy schemes for taking down the Bern. It was her favorite Academy pastime, dreaming an end to war. Suddenly, however, it seemed more real: the fighting *and* being in a position to do something about it. But *what?*

She expected her friends would be aboard the ship, getting some well-deserved rest. Instead, she found them around a small fire they'd built under *Parsona's* starboard wing.

"Why aren't you guys inside?" she asked. She crouched down by the fire and extended her hands toward it.

"Walter said we should stay out here tonight, just so everything feels fair."

Molly shot him a look. His face was aglow, his metallic-looking skin reflecting the firelight.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, shrugging.

His look didn't inspire much confidence in Molly. "You had better not be up to anything," she told him.

"I'm not! I sswear."

Molly held his gaze a moment longer, her eyes narrowed for effect.

"Is the Admiral okay?" Cat asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I think he just had a dizzy spell earlier." Molly rubbed her hands together. "Now he's putting a lot of pressure on me to stick around and help them fight the Bern."

"It's a lost cause," Scottie said.

"How d'ya know it's lost?" Cat asked.

"Besides the fact they knocked a StarCarrier out of orbit? How about the rumors the Drenards are invading the rest of the Milky Way?"

"Hogwash." Cat said.

"He's right about the Drenards," Molly said. "Saunders confirmed it." She looked at Walter. "That means Anlyn's probably in trouble, or at the very least that her political efforts didn't go very well."

Walter shrugged. He poked at the fire with a stick, sending up a spiral of twirling sparks.

Molly turned to Scottie. "What about that fuel we discussed? I'm still willing to pay double."

Scottie frowned. "I can get my hands on some, but I'd prefer to work out the use of your ship, just for a day or two—"

"We already discussed this."

Scottie stared into the fire. "I'll see what I can do. How much do you need?"

"A full tank."

Scottie laughed. He stopped and looked around at the others, seemingly amazed that nobody had joined him. "You serious?"

Molly nodded.

"But you already have a quarter tank in her. And yeah, I looked. It's what I do."

"It's Navy issue," Cat told him.

"Oh." He glanced over at Molly. "*Oh!* You're not looking to move something hot, you're thinking *hyperspace!"*

"Keep your voice down," Cat told him.

"You thinking that's the safest place to be right now, or something? How's that more important than getting my friends to safety?"

Molly shook her head. "I've got people there that need me."

"You've got people *here* that need what you've got even more. Do you—" he turned to Cat. "Does she even know what that drive'll do?"

Cat shrugged.

Scottie jabbed a thumb back at *Parsona's* hull. "Do you know what you've got in there?"

"I'm starting to wonder," Molly said.

Cat leaned back from the fire and rested on her elbows. She scanned the clearing for any Navy folk, then looked over to Scottie. "I can vouch for her," she said. "Consider her a part of the Underground if you have to."

Scottie stood up and walked around the fire and sat down beside Molly. He leaned his head over and reached his hands out toward the

fire, animating with them while he talked. “Friend of mine built it,” he said. “Ronnie Ryke. We called him Doctor Ryke, even though he never even finished grade school. Still, smartest damn feller you ever knew. Built the thing in his garage, tinkering with the very laws of physics.”

“It was the fuel,” Cat inserted.

He held out a palm to quiet her, but nodded. “Right, see I was—well, *skimming* some fuel from my boss, trying to make some ends meet, and I owed Ronnie for some work. He had me pay him in fuze, doing test tube stuff with it. I thought he was growing his own critters, but he weren’t interested in the biology—”

“Critters?” Molly asked.

“Creatures. Little organisms.” Scottie scrunched up his face. “Didn’t your dad tell you what fuze is made of?”

“I was six years old, Scottie. Just tell me already!”

Cat laughed and Walter looked up from his storm of sparks, seemingly paying attention.

Scottie leaned uncomfortably close. “It’s like a colony of little cells, okay? And you know how a nadiwok sees in infrared? And how a cloud viper sees with ultrasound?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, fuze can see hyperspace. Or *through* hyperspace, anyway.” He looked over at Cat, who was leaning back, smiling. “Am I explaining it right?”

“You’re doing fine.”

“You’re telling me that fusion fuel is *alive?”* Molly asked.

“Well, *yeah*. And Ronnie got to messing with his own hyperdrives. He figured the fuze market was too competitive, but nobody was building and selling hyperdrives on the down-low, see? And he was smart about it. Figured out why nobody else could duplicate what the Navy built. He even had some ideas about who had actually built the first drives. The key had something to do with how the Navy treated their fuze. *Their* method shocks it into action, killing some in the process, which is why the needle goes down. But Ryke figured out how to build one that got around that. His drive coaxed the critters where he wanted them to go, rather than jolt them to death.”

“Yeah, but my drive runs empty just like any other.”

Scottie shook his head. “*Faster* than any other. That’s the thing, it’s inefficient to do it Ronnie’s way. Setting the damn things *free* costs you more than killing ’em, which is probably why the Navy never looked into alternatives.”

“So he couldn’t sell the drives because it cost too much to fuel them?”

“Hell, no! The people that’d be buying these drives wouldn’t have cared about ten percent losses. They woulda snatched ’em up

quicker'n he coulda built 'em! We had a mighty row over that. Nearly came to blows, Ronnie and me. Egghead redneck was sitting on a goldmine, but all he'd do was shake his head!"

"Volume," Cat said, waving him down.

"Sorry," he whispered. "See, Ronnie had what he called himself an ethical DIE-lemma. He did some tests with his first drive—"

"Only drive," Cat said.

"Same damn thing!" He tapped Molly on the knee. "Sorry about that—"

"Let's get to the point," she said, as nicely as she could.

"I'm *at* it," he said. "Ronnie did his first tests and found something weird. He could move objects across the room! Didn't matter that there was a planet beneath his feet or one at arrival, he could thread objects to any place at all, gravity be damned. He could jump you from here to a barstool in Bekkie if you like! No more Lagrange points, no more worrying about how far away you're going."

Molly looked to the fire and rubbed a hand through her hair. Walter was gazing at her over the flames, his face practically alight.

"Darrin," Molly whispered to herself.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"No, I do," Molly met his gaze. "The ship—*my* ship—did something funny once. I never could figure it out. We jumped into the middle of an asteroid field with no deflection. I thought maybe the matter around us had canceled each other out, but I did some calculations later and it was impossible."

"Yeah, she's a special ship, what with Ronnie's drive in there. I figured you knew. I was wondering why you didn't jump us out of the Carrier this morning. Thought maybe you were scared to show your hand, or something, what with the blackcoats on board."

Molly shook her head. "No, I would have, had I known. I would have—" She rested her face in her palms as the long-gone potential to avert so many catastrophes swirled together in her mind. "I would have done a lot of things different!" she said, her voice muffled by her hands, her body on the verge of crying.

Scottie put his arm around her; she felt Cat scoot to her other side.

"Don't do that," Cat said. "Don't relive the past."

"This was Ryke's ethical thingy," Scottie told her. "Boy broke down with all he could do. Good *and* bad. Bombs and what-not."

Molly looked up into the fire, the full implications of such a drive sinking in. The possibilities seemed endless. She thought about the ability to move bombs wherever you wanted them, a fantasy of so many radical groups. She thought about being able to move people—assassins and thieves—with complete reliability. It finally dawned on

her what Scottie and the Callites wanted to use the drive for: interplanetary border crossings, getting a people to safety. She could imagine how many groups would kill for such a device, or trade a planet for one.

The dread of having such a thing in her ship made her stomach sink. More of her selfish horrors hit her again. They could've jumped straight out of Glemot, no need for the ruse that ended an entire people. They could've jumped straight back to Earth at any time during their journey home! They could've jumped *anywhere*. Maybe Lucin had known about the hyperdrive. Was that possible? Could her mom have *not* been the thing he was looking for?

"You okay?" Cat asked.

"How did he do it?" Molly asked. "How did this Ryke guy live with such knowledge?"

"Not well, let me tell you." Scottie shook his head. "He had a breakdown. Then, when he pulled himself together, he started drawing up these schemes to end the war. Galactic peace stuff. Without asking my advice, he started sending stuff to Drenard. Notes and messages. Straight-ticket. Plopped 'em down on the planet, like letters asking them to stop shooting."

"You're kidding."

"Hell, no. Wish I were. He invited all sorts of trouble out here. Now this was a dozen years ago or so, back when the planet was quiet."

Cat laughed. "It's still pretty quiet, Scottie."

He shot her a look. "You know what I mean."

"What happened next?" Molly asked. Bringing the Drenards into the story had her eager to hear more. She leaned close to the fire, wrapping her arms around her knees. She noticed Walter doing the same on the other side of the fire; the stick he was using to scatter embers had fallen still, and he seemed to have become very interested in the discussion.

"First thing the Drenards did was start tracing the jump signatures back here, and they realized they had a problem. Military dudes must've gone ballistic. Can you imagine? I bet they were expecting nukes at any minute. Messages were popping out of hyperspace that said, 'Stop shooting.' Hell, I would've read the 'or else,' too!"

Scottie blew in his hands and rubbed them together. "That's when they sent their envoy. All the way to cosmopolitan Lok. And that's how the Drenard Underground formed."

"Just like that?"

"You want the long version?"

She did, but other things seemed more important. She leaned back and looked at the underside of *Parsona's* wing. There was a black

smudge of soot above her where the smoke was bouncing off and trailing around the sides. She pictured the fleet in orbit beyond the wing, like a constellation of stars, twinkling.

"I'm impressed your friend could make the decisions he made," Molly said.

Scottie grunted. "Flankin' goldmine," he said.

A hush fell over the campfire. Walter threw his stick into the fire and excused himself; he padded up the ramp and into *Parsona* to use the bathroom.

After a moment of silence, Scottie began explaining more. He went over the general idea of rifts, how Ryke had wrangled with Drenardian politicians for permission to permanently close all connections with the rest of the universe. He even hinted at the battle that had stranded much of the Underground in hyperspace, which pretty much caught Molly up to the present.

But she was only half listening. Her thoughts kept flickering like an open flame, jumping and popping and sparking with possibilities. She thought about all the schemes she might bounce off Cole if he were there with her. And most of all, she thought about how close she was to going off in search of him, how that void in her chest might soon be filled. She gazed into the fire—that lambent dance of orange and white plasma—and dreamed of his arms around her one more time.

It would be worth *anything* for that, she decided. She knew it was selfish, but the longing was too great to overcome. And as insane as it sounded, even to herself, she knew it would be worth it to hold him and be held by him, even if it was just one final time. Even if it was the very last thing she would ever do.

To feel whole again, for a brief moment, was all she wanted.

Even if the galaxy was crumbling to pieces around her.

43

The man in the hyperskimmer brought his arms down in a wide arc, slashing toward Cole with his invisible blade. Inside the cockpit, Cole flinched away from the blow, but as soon as the figure completed the motion, he realized it hadn't been meant for him. His skimmer lurched to the side as the other craft pulled away, both docking arms neatly parted in one perfect swipe.

Cole cursed and grabbed the control stick. He gave the accelerator a shove and looked to the side. The man with the buckblade grinned through the rain as he slumped back in his seat, the canopy closing around him.

Without thinking it through too clearly, Cole thumbed his own canopy open. He ground his teeth together, consumed with the primal rage any pilot feels after their craft has been dealt a blow. The glass came back, and the horizontal rain pelted him as it invaded the interior of his craft. Cole didn't care. Pulling his feet up under himself, he steered with the control stick and raced over toward the other skimmer as it tried to peel away.

Cole grimaced through the stinging rain. He watched the bemused smugness fade from the passenger's face as he approached at ramming speed. The look was transformed into one of shock as the two skimmers collided, sending Cole through the air and onto the deck just forward of their canopy.

Were it not for the nonskid on the deck, Cole probably would've bounced and slid right across the craft and off the other side. Instead, he managed to spread himself out and hold on. He waited for the skimmer to begin swerving in an attempt to buck him off, but it never happened. Instead, the canopy started peeling back once more, and the passenger leaned forward, that dangerous cylinder reappearing in his hands.

Cole scrambled toward the front of the skimmer, away from the cockpit. The two saboteurs yelled back and forth inside the craft. The driver jabbed a finger toward Cole, then pointed to himself. The passenger waved him off and crawled out of the cockpit and onto the flat deck. They seemed to be arguing over who got the privilege of killing him.

The wounded skimmer got back up to speed just as Cole began to run out of room at the pointed end of the triangular craft. As they accelerated, solid walls of spray rose up to either side of him from the forward foil. Cole scooted back until he could glance down at the watery land racing by under the nose of the ship. He returned his focus to the man with the buckblade, who was inching ever closer,

one hand on the deck to steady himself, the other one probing the air ahead with the invisible sword.

Cole crept back even further to stay away from the deadly blade. As he ran out of decking, he reached out and grasped one of the stabilizing arms bracing the hydrofoil, his grip on the tubular metal slick with spitting water.

His quarry moved closer, waving his monofilament weapon back and forth as if trying to gauge the distance, hoping to kill or chase off Cole without putting himself at risk. Cole thought about jumping, about throwing himself through the wall of water to the side and bracing for a rough landing. Someone from HQ would find him as surely as they had through several feet of snow. But then, the skimmer would make it to the Luddite camp with detailed knowledge of the upcoming raid. *His* raid. And Cole couldn't allow that.

The sword swished through the air closer and closer with each swipe, near enough now to hear it over the pounding rain. It made a wisping noise, almost as if slicing the airborne drops of water in two. Cole looked past the waving arm and saw the mad, determined sneer below the man's goggles. He gripped the hydrofoil even tighter and leaned back, out over the nose of the ship, his head just inches from the wall of shooting spray. And suddenly—he felt the metal in his hand giving way like a squeezed sponge.

His hand!

Glancing back at his furious grip on the foil's support strut, Cole saw he'd dented and warped the metal where he'd been grasping it. His hand looked so real, it was easy to forget what it could do. The magnetic blade once again swiped through the air close enough to hear. Death's nearness steeled Cole's resolve. He tightened his grip on the strut and released his arm's full fury.

There was a groan, and then a harsh, ringing crack as solid steel bent and parted. The starboard strut snapped off, and the forward foil lurched sideways, folding back on the remaining strut and digging into the watery surface. As soon as it did, the flat, smooth ride turned into an airborne disaster. The nose of the skimmer dove into the water, caught on something below the surface, and the entire craft kicked up, bucking like an injured beast. In a mere instant, Cole and his attacker were launched into the air, tumbling high over the glimmering, wet land. The skimmer summersaulted below them, the pilot trapped as it smacked and crumbled and skipped across the endless brown lake below.

Cole had but a few glimpses of the destruction, and just a single, stretched-out moment of soaring through the sky. He flew the same direction as the sideways rain, so all of it hung in space around him, seemingly motionless. The bizarre illusion of suspended droplets

extended that solitary second into an eternity of gliding and falling. But the never-ending plummet was an illusion, one that was about to be shattered by the placid wall of solid water rushing up to greet him.

Just before he hit, Cole thought to secure his goggles. He clamped his real hand over his eyes and threw up his new one to absorb the impact. He hit at such a high speed, it felt more like solid land than forgiving fluid. Cole bounced across the surface, his other arm and both legs flying out in a tangle of cartwheeling, plowing limbs. The rolling and spinning seemed to go on even longer than the flight through the air, and as Cole's head was repeatedly dunked, he worried as much about running out of breath as sustaining any injury.

Finally, though, he slowed to a halt—his body sore but intact. His legs sank below the surface. He started treading water with his arms, when his boots and knees felt solid ground beneath him. Solid, but trembling, almost as if moving. Cole swam with his hands to regain his balance and stood up, finding the water to be a little more than a meter deep. He peered around for the wreckage of the skimmer and the man with the sword.

Both were less than a dozen meters away, and both were in pieces. Cole waded toward the ruined hyperskimmer as several chunks of human remains floated his direction amid a slick of red. A severed leg drifted past, powered along by an arterial jet. Cole thought about what must've happened: the active buckblade tangling up in the man's body as he careened across the water's surface. An arm approached, detached at the collarbone. The hand remained clenched in a fist, the water sizzling around an invisible thread of humming power. Cole stepped to the side, careful of the sharp nothingness, and grabbed the arm by the wrist, as wary as if seizing a cobra. He twisted the fist to the side, keeping the buckblade pointed away from himself, and slowly worked the stiff fingers off the handle. It wasn't until he powered the blade down that he felt able to breathe easily around the device. Penny and Arthur had warned him how dangerous they were, but being in the presence of one felt like standing on a ticking bomb. Cole held the cylinder away from himself and dropped the arm in disgust. He turned to survey the twisted wreckage of the hyperskimmer.

It was hard to believe how lucky he'd been. One twist of the skimmer's hydrofoil, and he'd chunked the swordsman and crushed the driver. All for a tweaked knee and a sore back. He made his way toward the heap of metal, figuring it was the only dry place to await rescue while he slightly embellished his story.

Then—his story started embellishing itself. Out of the canopy burst a fist, the metal around it peeling back as if from an unnatural blow. Cole stopped in his tracks. Beneath his boots, he could feel the

surface of hyperspace trembling with movement, rippling now and then as something slid below the surface like a thing alive.

The hand ripped a large section of plasteel off as if it were made of paper, and out of the gnarled mass of machinery, the thin driver emerged, his face contorted into a mask of fury. Cole took a step back and fumbled with the buckblade, trying to remember which way was up with the thing. He held it away from his body with his new hand—just in case—and powered it on. When he looked up, he saw the man peeling more metal out of his way, his thighs kicking through the twisted decking as if it were no more viscous than water.

Cole looked at his hand, then back to the unnatural figure thrashing his way toward him.

He realized at once that he had his foe out*manned*.

And that it wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Part XVI – Decisions

"Temptation, a magnet, nears the moral compass."

~The Bern Seer~

44

For the second time in two days, *Parsona* made an early morning approach to Bekkie, flying low and under the barest cover of dawn. As the morning sun peeked over the horizon, it cast long shadows over the dry land, dramatically illuminating the sad and severe differences between that previous flight and the current one. Gone were the long, horizontal dust plumes of busy traffic, like ephemeral, fuzzy snakes slithering up into the sky. They had been replaced with vertical clouds of a darker hue—rising columns of smoke that marked the death and destruction that had rained down from the sky the day before.

The distant plumes weren't the only residue from the one-sided battle: the tragic remains of the Navy fleet could be seen long before they reached town. Molly banked around the odd wreckages dotting the landscape, the twisted remnants of military hardware still smoldering from its impact. Around each wreck, the dry Lokian grass formed black circles of expanding char ringed with thin, orange halos of fire. Each growing circle of blackened grass reminded Molly of Glemot, of the way that singular bomb had circumnavigated the planet, swallowing it up and adding it to the void of space.

Beyond the dotted plains, Bekkie bore its own unique signs of rained-down hellfire. Red lights pulsed throughout the sleepless city, illuminating the dusk-shadowed faces of buildings with the color of emergency and worry. Some of the structures formed unnatural, jagged shapes, like teeth and broken bone shoved up from the ground, all visible scars of a town penalized for its importance. No other part of Lok had been hit so hard; the shattered hulls were densest around the town. It had been logical for the fleet to arrive above the planet's capital. What was *unusual* was the manner in which they were brought straight down out of orbit, ignoring the normal parabola of reentry. It was as if the town's importance, its *gravity*, had been temporarily suspended.

Molly kept *Parsona* low, just above the waving grasses. As she flew past the corpse of another ship hundreds of times more powerful than her own, the terror of sudden reprisal from the fleet above crept up in her throat and remained lodged there.

"I'm starting to feel like this was a bad idea," she said aloud.

With only her mom and the Wadi in the cockpit with her, it fell on the former to answer, though the Wadi seemed to respond by curling up tighter against her neck.

"I don't think good ideas any longer have place in this universe," Parsona said. "I'm beginning to think you were right about hyperspace."

Molly checked the cargo cam to make sure Walter didn't sneak in on them talking. "In what way?" she asked.

"That we'd be just as well off to jump there with no way of coming back."

Molly laughed, more out of nervousness and empathy than mirth. "I'm glad I never rigged you up to control the hyperdrive, then."

"Me too."

Another wrecked ship smoked off to port, visible mostly by the eerie glow of things burning within. Ahead, on the outskirts of town, Molly saw flashlights darting about with anxious twitches, like morning bugs caught in a jar. Whatever it was they were looking for, they were desperate to find it.

"If Scottie comes through with the fusion fuel, it's gonna be hard to wait until we get back to the clearing to jump away," Molly said.

"I've already thought the same thing. But the survivors from that carrier need the supplies. It's the least we can do for them. Right, Cat?"

Molly turned and saw the Callite had joined them in the cockpit. The Wadi flicked its tongue in her direction, winning a pat on her head for the effort. Molly smiled up at her and got a hair-tousling in return.

"Bekkie looks worse for the wear," Cat said, peering out at the approaching town. "And you're being light on the throttle, aren't ya?"

"I was just telling mom that I feel like coming here might be a mistake. Maybe I'm just putting it off."

Cat crawled into the nav seat. "Can't cower in a wooded clearing the rest of your days. 'Sides, all you gotta do is run by the Navy offices and let them know where their people are, maybe secure a place for them to stay. Walter and I will handle rounding up supplies for your friends in black."

"And Scottie will round up the fuel?" Molly asked.

"He says he will, and I believe in him. So stop fretting. We'll be in and out in no ti—"

"Don't say it," Molly said, waving her off. "I hate hearing how easy stuff is gonna be. It never is." She pulled up, gaining a little altitude as they reached the outskirts of the city. She soon spotted her old slip in Pete's now half-empty stables. The sight of her open space made her rub the tender pads of her fingers together as she remembered she had not yet paid.

"Can't we go ssomewhere closser?" a voice hissed by her side.

Molly turned and saw Walter standing behind the flight seats. The Wadi's tongue vibrated in his direction like a bit of red yarn in a stiff breeze.

"Turbulent waters aren't for testing," Cat said.

"What'ss that mean?" Walter asked.

"It means you don't try something new in the middle of a storm," Molly explained. "It's an old Navy saying."

"Goes back to when they used to sail ships on the ocean," Cat said.

Molly and Cat exchanged a look. Once again, she realized how little she knew about the Callite. Walter turned from one to the other, his face scrunched up in a confused sneer.

"Listen, this is just one of those times when you have to trust m __"

The radio crackled, cutting her off: "*Parsona*, Pete's Hideaway, come in."

Molly turned away from Walter and flicked on the radio. "Pete? This is *Parsona*, I was just about to call you. Is it okay if we—"

"Cap, I need to speak to Scottie. It's urgent."

Molly turned in her seat to call for him, but Walter was already scampering back to the cargo bay. The Palan returned, literally dragging the large man—two of his silvery hands clutching one of Scottie's.

"It's Pete," Molly said. She pointed to the dash and gradually banked around toward the stables.

Scottie leaned over the controls. "Pete? You there?"

"Scottie? Oh, thank the gods. I need your help."

Scottie glanced at Cat and then Molly. "We saw what happened. Sorry we hightailed it the way we did. You suffer much damage?"

"No, it's not that. It's—they're rounding them up. The Callites."

"What? With all this going on they're gonna send up another shuttle?"

"It ain't just the illegals this time. They're rounding up everyone."

"Do what?"

"They've got Ryn," Pete said.

••••

Parsona descended to the dry lot, her thruster wash kicking up a cloud of dust, which seemed to billow out and cushion her landing. Walter lowered the ramp immediately, allowing the plumes of powdered dirt to swirl and drift through the cargo bay. Molly swam through the haze ahead of the others and was halfway down the ramp when Pete stomped through the fog to meet them.

"What's this about Ryn?" Scottie asked, as he joined Molly on the boarding ramp.

Pete spit to the side. A long stream of purple juice gathered dust

as it fell, splotching *Parsona's* ramp with a streak of gummy saliva. "They got him and some others," he said. "Took 'em to immigrations. I swear the most of 'em were legal. Shopkeeper at Wayside and half the kitchen staff at Oasis."

"Where're they taking them?" Molly asked.

"More shuttles." Pete spat again. "They flew two more over from New Hoboken last night. If they stick to their schedule, them shuttles'll go up at any time."

"And they'll get shot down," Cat said. Molly turned and saw a grimace of pained fury on her dark, scaly face.

"What about the ssuppliess?" Walter hissed.

Molly turned to face him; the Wadi hissed in her ear as if startled by the sudden movement. "We'll worry about the supplies later. Right now we should—"

"What kinda supplies?" Pete asked.

"Food and water," Scottie said.

"And camping gear, just in case," Cat said. "Blankets, at the very least. And clothes."

Pete surveyed the foursome as the dust continued to settle around them. He seemed to arrive at some conclusion, then spat a sticky string to the side, a long trail of it clinging to his lip and sagging with incredible viscosity.

"Town's making a run on items like that, but I got sources of my own." He nodded toward Molly and Walter. "Why don't you youngins stay here. I'll have the stuff delivered." His eyes darted to Cat for a moment. "You two should come with me. See about stopping them shuttles."

Molly stepped forward to complain. She didn't like being coddled, or told what to do, but Cat placed a firm hand on her shoulder and held her back.

"He's right," Cat said, never taking her eyes off Pete. "You two stay here. We'll see about Ryn and the others."

"Just need a credit chip," Pete said. "I'll call in for the stuff and have it delivered." He looked to Scottie and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "You ready to go?"

"The sooner the better." Scottie turned to Molly. "We won't be long. I'll get your fuze as soon as we get back."

Molly nodded. "Just be safe." She turned to Walter and waved him forward. "The chip," she told him. Walter squeezed between her and Cat to hand over the Navy credit chip, which he had insisted on being in charge of. Scottie tugged it from his reluctant grip, then moved to put it in his pocket.

"Hey," Walter said. "Jusst sscan it and give it back."

"Scanner's in the office," Pete said. "I'll keep it safe. I promise."

Walter hissed as the chip disappeared. Molly put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back by her side.

"Alright, let's get out of here," Pete said. He gave Molly one last look. "I'll have my dockhands round up everything you need. Might take a few hours, so just stay put."

Molly nodded. The two men turned and stomped down the ramp; Cat paused to squeeze Molly's arm. They exchanged a look, and then she turned as well, her bright, blond ponytail whipping around as she hurried off after the others.

"Well this sucks," Molly grumbled as she watched them go.

"Are you kidding?" Walter tugged on Molly's sleeve. "We're getting room sservicse! All the ssuppliess and none of the lifting!" He dragged her back into the cargo bay with one hand and pulled out his videogame with the other. "Thiss iss ssweet!"

••••

After closing the cargo ramp, Walter lounged sideways across his crew seat, his feet in Anlyn's old chair as he lost himself in his videogame. Molly roamed around the cargo space jacked up with nervous energy; she tried her best to straighten up the clutter from having so many people moving through the ship of late. She snapped an attachment on the air hose and blew dust from one surface to the other before deciding the exercise was pointless. Rather than get anything cleaner, it just won her annoyed glances from Walter, who seemed to cringe at the air hose's hissing sounds.

Molly sighed and put the hose back. "I'm gonna take a nap in the cockpit," she told Walter. "Come get me when those supplies show up."

He nodded, then wiggled across the two seats to get more comfortable. Molly strode into the cockpit and keyed the door shut. Grabbing her helmet off its rack, she settled into Cole's seat and pulled the dome down over her head.

"Mom?"

For once, Parsona didn't respond immediately. Molly checked the switch on the side of her helmet to confirm the mic was on. It was. She reached forward to the dash controls—

"Yes?"

"Oh, hey. Everything okay?"

A pause. "Yes. I overheard the conversation with Pete. Those poor Callites…"

"This whole planet is flanked—" Molly stopped herself. She felt a sudden wave of heat in her flightsuit for having cursed in front of her

mom. Her time on Lok was wearing on her nerves and surrounding her with bad influences. And without Academy professors around to chastise her poor behavior, or Cole around to always try and impress, she could feel herself growing up too fast in some ways. Thankfully, her mother now had some semblance of a presence in her life, which helped. Presently, however, Parsona forced Molly to bear the shame of her word choice in silence, rather than lecture her.

"When your father and I were here," Parsona said after a long moment, "there was talk about scrapping the colonization efforts on Lok completely. The Navy wanted to move everyone off and abandon the entire planet. They even wanted to mark it off-limits to future expansion."

"You're kidding. Why?"

"They couldn't stop the flow of fusion. That was the official version and the crux of your father and I being here. Your dad was the great Navy hope, you know. He and Lucin came back heroes from the war. They could've taken any post they wanted. Lucin chose the Academy, said he could do the most good there."

"Yeah, for which side?" Molly asked, unable to conceal the disgust in her voice.

"If you and Saunders are correct, it makes a lot of sense. That's the front line, really, in keeping up their efforts to break through to the rift. SADAR has nothing on hindsight, but I bet your father would've put all this together if he hadn't been blinded by his love for the man."

"I wish he were here right now," Molly said softly. *And Cole*, she added to herself.

"Me too. And I wish I could be there for you in more than voice."

"Yeah, I'm sorry to wish him here and not you. After Dakura… well, I don't think I'd be any more comfortable if you were here in person. No offense."

"None taken."

"It's just that this is how I've only ever known you. I like thinking I could have you in my life forever."

Parsona didn't answer at first.

"Forever's a long time," she finally said.

"Not for you—"

"Sweetheart, your father didn't lock me away solely as a backup. He—I could go just as mad in here as I could on Dakura. Cheating death isn't natural. Our brains just can't cope after a while—"

"What're you saying?"

"Just that I need you to be prepared, as any child must be. You might not have me around forever. If something happens to the ship, I'll be gone. There might even come a day when I'd ask you to—"

“No. Don’t say it and I wouldn’t do it.” Molly looked out her porthole as another ship pulled out of the stables, slow and low.

“Maybe they should’ve abandoned this place long ago,” Molly said. “Maybe none of this Bern stuff would’ve happened.”

“Or it would’ve happened sooner,” Parsona said.

“What do you mean?”

“The official reason we were here was the fusion fuel, but we kept getting bogged down with missing persons reports.”

“The election fraud.”

“If it’s that,” Parsona said. “What doesn’t fit is that the number of Callites disappearing seemed to match the rate of Humans. Only, nobody was much put off by *their* disappearance to look into it.”

“But why would the government want *their* blood? To cast votes for the Freedom party? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Exactly. They wouldn’t.”

“Maybe the Callites were just going underground to avoid immigration officials.”

“Which is precisely why we were told to not look into it. It was considered out of our jurisdiction. Still, the viability of Lok depended on a rising population. Instead, it was dwindling, even with the land giveaways and tax incentives. The disappearances outpaced the inflow of colonists. Your father used to say Lok was doomed with or without the fusion trade.”

“Do you think the Bern could’ve been up to something? Could they have been trying to secure the other rift by running everyone off?”

“I don’t know. Seems convoluted and roundabout for them. Maybe—” Another pause. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

Parsona highlighted a target on SADAR. “Look,” she said.

Molly tracked the moving object. It was a passenger class shuttle rising up from the outskirts of Bekkie and heading straight for space. She pulled up the town overlay map and looked for the side street café where she and Walter had been sitting. She followed the departure trajectory and saw that it matched up with the general direction of the other shuttle they’d watched lift off.

Molly wanted to ask “Why?” but sat and stared in silence, instead. She looked up from the blinking blip on the screen to the carboglass and scanned the buildings beyond for a rising plume of jet exhaust. She saw nothing through the haze of dawn and was forced to watch via SADAR, forced to watch as the shuttle nearly reached the ionosphere before the altitude indicator stopped climbing. It paused at apogee, and then the altimeter began to count down with a sickening sense of looming finality.

“How can they do that? How is that *legal?”*

“They’re letting the Bern do their dirty work for them. Probably calculated what a shuttle costs versus having to move the same illegals back to their planet over and over.”

“But they’re sending them to their deaths. Doesn’t anyone care?”

“Very few. The Underground was full of supporters. They practically formed around their lack of xenophobia. Unfortunately, they had a larger war to wage.”

“You’re talking about people like Scottie and Pete.”

“And your father.”

Molly looked down at her lap. She stopped stroking the Wadi and rubbed the rough pads of her fingers. All but one pinky were beginning to heal somewhat from a day of not needing anything. She could feel that one digit throbbing and dreaded ever having to vote again. She wondered if Pete would make her vote for the supplies and dockage, or if he’d let her slide or maybe just pay extra in cash.

“Hey,” she said aloud, a hazy memory coming back to her.

“What?”

“Pete’s voting machine.”

“What about it?”

“Well, maybe nothing, but I could’ve sworn when I was in there the other day that the ‘F’ button was new and shiny.” Molly paused, her thoughts interrupted by the disturbing simplicity of the shuttle target disappearing from SADAR. She watched that empty spot of blackness on the screen as the green phosphor symbols faded away to nothing—all the vector numbers flicking to zero. There was no tally for what was just lost.

“Pete’s machine,” Molly muttered to herself. “I’m pretty sure the Liberty button was just about worn off.”

45

"You're dead!" the skimmer pilot yelled. He kicked through the remains of his ruined craft and strode toward Cole, shucking off a tangle of wire and hydraulic cables as he went. Cole waded backward with short steps and a wide stance as the ground beneath him continued to tremble and occasionally lurch. He held the buckblade away from his body, comforted somewhat by the slight hum he could hear from the handle.

That comfort didn't last long. The small man fully emerged from the wreckage and did the unthinkable: he yanked off his goggles and tossed them aside.

"I'll have you in pieces!" the man roared. He stomped through the water with both hands out, his fingers curled as if to reach out and clutch Cole to death. Cole stopped shuffling and readied his blade. Whatever the man was made of, however much of him Arthur had replaced, he figured he had the upper hand to be armed. In a manner of speaking.

The wiry man stopped and looked at Cole's hand, almost as if weighing the same odds. He snarled and reached into his coveralls, which were tattered and hanging in strips from the knife-like curls of wrecked steel. Out came a metal cylinder much like the one Cole wielded—and the playing field was once again uneven.

The furious man thumbed his blade on and lunged into range, swiping with an angle five. It was an unorthodox, but powerful move. Cole watched the man's elbows and wrists line up in slow motion, performing a slashing attack Penny had told him to never use. And she had shown him why. Cole's muscles responded automatically—out of fear and from a deep memory. He lined up his blade to deflect the blow, to send it back into the man's neck, but when the magnetic fields of the two blades met each other, the raw power behind the strike overcame the attacker's poor angle. The impact tossed Cole backward and likely would've thrown his blade through his collarbone, had not his new elbow been locked.

He landed with a splash, his heels kicking and scrambling for the ground beneath him. He swam backward, keeping his distance as the man swiped through the water, his teeth bared in rage.

"One piece at a time!" the figure roared.

Cole scrambled to his feet and threw out a feeble swipe to keep the man at bay. As Cole's blade passed harmlessly in front of his foe, his attacker lashed out with his own sword. The strike wasn't aimed at Cole, but rather, at the back of his blade. The magnetic repulsion made Cole's weapon pick up speed, spinning him around like a top.

He lost his balance again and fell backward into the mud-colored water. The man behind him laughed as Cole splashed his way upright. He turned and resumed his stance. He realized he was being toyed with—chewed on and released as by some wiry dog.

"Amazing how the universe works, isn't it?" The man lifted both hands up to the sky. He opened his mouth and turned his head, gathering up some of the drifting rain before spitting it out. "Everything comes right back around, wouldn't you say?"

Cole stepped forward, remembering what Penny said about buck-blade fights being no time for talk. He slashed an angle one at the man's knee, keeping low to remain as defensive as possible. The man's arm became a blur: one moment lifted up into the rain, the next moment down by his hips, repulsing Cole's attack. Cole's arm flew back, his body contorting with the sudden change in direction. He allowed his feet to come out from beneath him, preferring to spin down into the water than get wrapped up in his own rebound.

Once again, he struggled to his feet, blade out. The small man became a blur once more, and Cole felt a sting on his left shoulder. He flinched, but his reaction came long after the blow. He looked down to see a red stain spreading through his soaked shirt, a neat slice of the fabric folded open.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

Cole looked up from his wound. The man across from him jutted out his chin; he brought up his free hand and placed his palm against the side of his own face, pulling his flesh sideways. "Perhaps if I were smeared across a taxi's windshield, it would jar your pathetic, fleshy, memory." He let go of his face and sneered at Cole, rain dripping from his nose.

Cole ignored him—ignored the man's mad delusions. He shuffled forward and aimed a reverse angle two at the man's off-weapon hip. He drove everything into the blow, unleashing the full fury of his mechanical elbow in a desperate attempt to drive through the man's defenses, striking him down as he made the mistake of talking.

His hand whistled through the wet air. As did the other man's. The invisible blades met with a sizzling, explosive crack, the force of the blow throwing Cole off his feet. He landed in the water one final time, his shoulder screaming out in pain from withstanding the force of impact. He rolled to his back, half expecting to be missing a limb from the rebound, but his sword hand was empty. The blow had been sufficient to rip it from his artificial grasp, possibly saving his life in the process. Or—as Penny had warned of ever letting his weapon go—at least delaying the inevitable.

Cole turned to face the small man and saw that his eyes were following something through the air. He smiled, and Cole heard a plop

in the distance, like the sound of a stone being swallowed by water. Cole looked around, but all that was left of his sword was a spread of brown ripples.

The man took two strides forward and was upon Cole, pulling him up by his neck. The power of the grip reminded him of being choked by the Stanley—but this time he was alone, with no Walter to take control and save him. The empty and endless horizon on all sides of him hammered that fact home.

"Tell me you recognize me," the man said. He shook Cole violently before pulling his face close. Cole glanced at the sword, which was being held out to the side, poised as if to split him in half across his waist. "How can you not recognize me in this *rain?"*

Cole looked up and studied the man's face. Part of him sagged with the pathetic futility of his struggles. Other parts—the non-mechanical parts—tensed with the will to live. He glared at the man from behind his goggles. He focused on his face for the first time as rivulets of water wiggled across his shielded vision.

It was the mad sneer that did it. The mad sneer and the fact that the man wasn't winded at all. Didn't even seem to be breathing.

"No," Cole said, shaking his head.

"Isn't it delicious?" the man asked. He licked some of the rain off his lips and smiled.

It was the scout, the small man from the Naval office, one of the men they had fought during the floods on—

"Palan," Cole said.

"That's right." The man released Cole and stepped backward. He twirled his sword through the air and looked up and down Cole's body, as if determining where to end him. "I was demoted because of you," he said. "High command gave me a few fleshy assignments before sending me to this contaminated outpost." His arm flashed and Cole felt a sting on his right hand. His body shivered with another delayed flinch. He looked to his hand as he heard something plop into the water.

His index finger was gone. A drop of rain hit the open wound and sparked something electrical within—a jolt he could feel across his artificial flesh. Before he could react, or even scream, another swipe sent his middle finger up in the air, tumbling through the rain with a few drops of crimson, spiraling down to the muddy wet below.

"My career was taken from me, one little piece at a time, for the failures you caused."

Cole stumbled back, out of the reach of the blade, but the man moved even faster, matching every step with one of his own.

"Now you'll give it back as I take you apart, one little piece at a time."

A blur and his ring finger was snicked off with robotic precision.

"Stop it!" Cole yelled. He fought the urge to cover the metal parts of himself with flesh and bone, but he knew that would be even worse. He held his reduced hand in front of himself and kept backing away, his mind racing with some scheme to go out heroically.

"I nearly fried a circuit when you showed up here. I begged to end you. I felt punished to have to merely watch and gather intel. But it seems fate is stronger than the chain of command, eh?"

A flick of the wrist, and Cole's pinky popped into the air. His entire artificial hand was on fire from the myriad wounds. He splashed backward as the ground beneath him shook, sending small ripples radiating out across the surface of the rain-streaked water.

The small man maintained his range and smiled. Cole wanted to throw something through those teeth, wanted to unleash the full power of his new elbow and hurl something at the man, just as he'd thrown the wrench through the skimmer. But all he had was his goggles, and throwing them would mean he couldn't even see his own demise coming. Besides, he wasn't sure he could even hurl the goggles properly with only a thumb to grasp them—

"You can't even put up a fight with your *better* parts, can you? Just imagine what I'm going to do to your flesh!"

The unseen blade whistled through the air, slicing the rain in half. Cole's thumb came off with another bite of pain. It flew up like the others, flashes of inner metal spotted with dollops of subcutaneous blood. Cole watched the digit spin, end over end. As it began its descent, he found his hand turning over beneath it, palm flat, his body reflexively moving to catch a piece of himself.

It landed in silence, all of hyperspace standing still as Cole gazed at the eerie realism of the thumb, its nail still pink and edged with a line of deadened white. He looked up, saw the smile on the man's face turn into a sneer, lips trembling with raw hate.

Cole leaned forward. He cupped the thumb in his palm, cradling it with what remained of his hand. He dropped his shoulder, brought his hand back as he twisted at the waist, then let fly with everything he had. Every ounce of fear and rage, every vibrating cell in him that wanted to kill in order to live, was unleashed. His hand seemed to boom through the very air, breaking the speed of sound, as it whizzed past. There was a crack as his elbow flew straight, then the sickening feel of his shoulder leaving its joint, his arm yanking forward where it didn't belong.

Cole cried out in pain and fell forward, sinking down to his knees. He gripped his dislocated and ruined shoulder with one hand and ground his teeth together, fighting to not pass out. Ahead of him, he heard the sizzle of a passing blade, saw the water bubble as something

fell through the rippled surface of hyperspace. Cole looked up as the small man sank to his own knees directly before him. His head came level to Cole's, but the sneer was gone. Half the man's head was gone. It had been opened up by the bullet-like thumb, a metallic sphere blossoming wide like a silver flower. Tufts of hair stuck to portions of it, and half a flapping face hung to one side.

The mysterious rain peppered the ruined head from behind, shooting up sparks of electricity as the mysterious figure sagged backward, disappearing into his dirt-colored, watery grave.

"How long have we been here?" Anlyn asked.

"Five hundred eighty two thousand four hundred and fifty two seconds," Edison said. "Approximately."

Anlyn sighed. "How long in a format I understand?"

"Three hundred seventy six thousand and forty two Hori berts."

"In *days*, love."

"Oh. A fraction less than six Earth days."

Anlyn groaned. The three hour shifts had gradually whittled down to hour shifts, as both of them reached the limits of their endurance. They took turns passing out where they sat, the sleep seeming to zip by in an eyeblink while the waking hour stretched out forever. Anlyn had spent more time talking to *herself* the last week than they had spent talking to each other, and she felt half insane because of it. It wouldn't have been so miserable if the fleet wasn't constantly shuffling around the incoming ships and moving the queue toward the rift. If they could just engage the autopilot and get a half day of rest, she would be fine for another few days of flying.

The radio squawked with instructions, and she watched as Edison responded his receipt of the transmission. As bad as she had it, Edison's task as translator made it much worse for him. Often, he woke up halfway through a transmission, and Anlyn had to phonetically repeat what he'd missed. They both operated in a dreamlike haze of sleep deprivation, made worse by the annoying snowstorm outside that never so much as wavered.

Anlyn shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She couldn't remember how many shifts ago she'd last showered, or even ate. The only break in her routine had been to sip water and use the bathroom. It was a Wadi's diet, no different than her years with Albert, and she felt as chained to a cockpit now as she ever had back then.

"How close are we?" she asked.

"N minus forty two."

"Forty one ships ahead of us," she thought aloud. "They've been going through about one per hour or so?"

"Approximately."

Anlyn groaned again. It had become as habitual to her as breathing. "Another two days."

"Slightly less, so reduce your anxiety proportionately."

Anlyn reached over and squeezed his arm. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better," she mumbled, "but why don't you get some sleep?"

Edison patted her hand. "This shift is mine, love," he said in

Drenard.

“Are you sure? I feel like I just woke up.”

“I’m positive.”

Anlyn sighed and leaned to the side, resting her head on his forearm.

“Wake me if you need me,” she whispered, as the blackness of sudden and immediate sleep began to swirl up around her.

“I need you,” Edison said softly.

“I’ll always need you.”

But she was already asleep.

47

The Wadi held on to her pair-bond's neck as she ran through a strange canyon. Strange, but familiar. She tasted the air with her scent tongue and realized they had come this route before, but somehow the canyon had been brighter back then, and they had stopped at a watering shaft and refreshed themselves.

There was no stopping this time. Her pair-bond ran right past the watering shaft and kept up her frantic pace. The Wadi held on with the smallest amount of claw possible, enough to not skitter off her pair-bond's back, but not enough to cause the pain-smoke. She hated causing the pain-smoke.

What her pair-bond leaked now was urgency. And fear, though not for herself.

This latter wisp of emotion nearly drifted by unnoticed, even though the column was strong and bright to the Wadi's senses. The problem was: it had become ever-present. Like the twin monsters of light that dominated her old home, that column of fear for others seemed to hang everywhere they went, solid and ferocious. For the Wadi, it was like a giant fang you soon curl your tail around and ignore because it has hung idle in your den for so long.

The Wadi tensed up as her pair-bond turned down another canyon. Odd, these canyons. All at sharp angles and pocked with square holes, all disgorging more large beasts like her pair-bond. Like her in size, anyway, but different in the tendrils of smoke that trailed out from their bodies—exuded from their very thoughts and feelings.

Her pair-bond ran as hard and fast as a Wadi now, her breathing raspy and labored. The Wadi exuded as much calming scent as she could, urging the pounding pulse she felt with her tail to relax itself. She also put out courage smoke. She curled her head around her pair-bond's neck and released as much of both as she could, forgetting her need to conserve her energy.

She waited to see if her pair-bond would respond.

It was so frustrating, trying to communicate. But she had only herself to blame. With the hell being wrought in her stomach—the ever-present urge to eat and drink and nourish her eggs—it left little energy for anything else. So very little energy. And even less time.

••••

Molly weaved her way through a dense crowd, gasping for breath as she slowed. Ahead of her, the street pinched tight with rubble,

leaving just enough room for pedestrians to squeeze through one at a time. Lokians pushed their way single-file, hands urging those ahead while buggies blasted their horns in futile frustration.

Molly veered out of the crush of people and scampered up the edge of the rubble, passing the roadblock. Two younger kids were up even higher, sifting through the rocks and laughing. Beyond them loomed the tail of a Navy bomber, its gleaming hull miraculously intact and leaning out over the street like a sundial. As she scampered down the mound of shattered building, Molly checked the street numbers to the side, looking for the address of the Navy office. Four twenty six. She had missed it.

She turned, looking back over the rubble and down the street where the crowds flowed dense into a tight stream. She felt certain the building number on the other side of the rubble had been—

It hit her. As solidly as the bomber had hit the building she was looking for. Molly looked down at her feet. Her destination was right below her, caked up in the treads of her flightboots.

"No flanking way," she muttered. She scanned the crowd for anyone in Navy black as the Wadi nudged her chin with its head. "It's okay," she told her. Molly held her hand up and rubbed the Wadi's neck with her finger. "Everything's gonna be fine," she lied.

That's what she loved about having a pet. You could lie to them and they didn't know any different. Somehow, saying what she knew to not be true made her feel better. It dissipated the bad sensations inside, just as the wind had removed from the morning sky all signs of the downed shuttle. Its great column of white liftoff smoke had hung over the city during her run into town, but now it was gone, scattered across the winds like so many forgotten Callites.

Molly saw no sign of Navy officials, but that was hardly surprising. She wouldn't be shocked to discover they had made scarce before the façade of their building had done the same. Her last remaining option for help felt like a poor choice; the town's sheriff had seemed a tad incompetent the last time she'd turned to him in need, or at least not very eager to help her out. But Molly couldn't think of any alternatives.

She looked around, trying to get her bearings straight. The small town of Bekkie felt huge all of a sudden—there was just so much going on. People running to and fro, clutching precious items against their chests; fires being fought; lights flashing; flames flickering. Behind it all were her friends in danger, the love of her life and her father gone from the universe, her mom telling her to get ready to be alone again, Saunders and his crew and all they'd been through, and so many Callites sent off to their death.

As Molly turned in place, trying to locate the steeple of the great

church in the center of town, she felt like her surroundings turned at a different rate than herself, as if the world spun on her while she stood still—and likewise stood still while she spun. Through a haze of smoke, she finally located that central spire of the great church and used it to locate herself. To center herself. She scampered down from the rubble and set off at a jog through the twists and turns of unplanned alleys.

The Sheriff would be able to help her, she told herself. She put one hand on the Wadi's back so it wouldn't use its claws, and hoped he didn't feel the same way about Callites as he had about pets.

••••

Molly approached the town square one street over from Main. She slowed to catch her breath and cut through a narrow alley that should dump her out right by the sheriff's office. Her skin crawled as she plunged into the crack between the two buildings. The shade trapped between them was cool—the lingering nighttime darkness not yet chased off by the rising sun.

Molly berated herself for her childish terror, but picked up the pace again. The tickling sensation of having something awful right at her back resurrected a nostalgic fear she once harbored for *Parsona's* cargo bay. When she was young, she used to run from her bedroom to the cockpit, sprinting ahead of the monsters to the safety of her father's lap. The sudden recollection clawed at her breath in a way the running couldn't. Molly burst out of the alley, gasping, tears in her eyes as she remembered the many hours she'd spent curled up against his belly while he spoke softly to himself, his voice muffled by his sealed helmet, his hand always moving up and down her back or smoothing her hair.

"That's her right there!"

The outburst startled that skittish memory back into the folds of Molly's brain. The accusatory words had arrived as well-aimed as any bullet, the way utterances can often cut through the din of so much background noise. Molly turned, her ears attuned to the fact that the speaker had been looking right at her as he yelled it.

There, behind the bars on the sheriff's window, she found two eyes peering right back at her. A hand stuck out between the bars and pointed, the finger trembling with excitement. "That's the one!"

Molly turned to look behind herself, to see if there was someone else the finger could be indicating. When she turned back, the sheriff loomed before her, seizing her with strong hands and removing any doubt.

"Hey, wait a sec—!"

The sheriff pulled her arm up tight behind her and force-marched her the last few steps she had intended to take anyway. Molly automatically resisted, pushing back against him as he manhandled her forward and through the door.

"Fine piece of detective work there, Sheriff Browne."

"That's enough out of you," the sheriff said to a prisoner in the far cell.

"What's going on?" Molly asked. She felt cuffs snap down around her wrists before she was handed off to a deputy, who nodded politely and tipped his hat before escorting her toward one of the empty cells. "Am I being arrested?"

"Assault and battery, ma'am."

The deputy smiled, winked, and dipped his chin. His accusation and flirtations didn't mix well.

"Do *what?"* Molly looked down at her manacled hands, as if to confirm the bizarre turn of events.

The deputy pushed her into the cell and slid the door shut with a bang. He then reached inside and unlocked the cuffs before pulling them out through the bars. Molly watched the bizarre charade of bureaucratic inefficiency and felt herself becoming detached from the entire scene. It had to be happening to someone else. She peered past the deputy to the sheriff, who was looking her up and down.

"You sure this is the woman that licked you?"

"Positive," a man said. He moved closer, out of the shaft of dust suspended around the window. The light kept him in silhouette, but Molly could recognize him by his massive frame, if not the accusation. Once she knew where to look, she could clearly see the bandage around his neck as well.

The sheriff laughed. "Paulie, are you sure you wanna go on record and say this girl whooped your ass?"

He laughed louder, and the deputy joined in, along with the prisoner to Molly's side. Thighs were slapped, sending up clouds of dust to gather by the windows.

"There were three of them, like I told you." Paulie said it defensively. He stepped closer to the cells and glared at Molly.

"This man tried to kill me!" Molly yelled. She reached through the bars and jabbed a finger in his direction. "He tied me up—they tied lots of people up and stole their votes! *Our* votes!"

"That's the dumbest thing—"

"Look!" Molly yelled. She became frantic, grabbing her sleeve and fighting to roll it up. This made no sense, her being behind bars. It made her brain boil, made it hard to think. She felt the Wadi scamper down and bury itself in a pocket as she finally got the sleeve past her

elbow.

"Look! Look at what they did to me." She held out her arm and pointed at the red circle around the needle mark.

"That explains her strength," Paulie said. "And her delusions. She's obviously an addict."

"Both of you settle down," the sheriff said. "This ain't for me to even hear. A judge'll decide what went which way for who and when."

"Whom," his deputy said.

"Whatever."

"No, he's right," the prisoner in the adjacent cell said, still laughing.

"And I said that's enough out of you. I swear, you people are driving me insane. All I needed this week was some peace and quiet and I've got fleets falling out of the sky, a rash of looting, and now this nonsense." He turned to Paulie as the big man seemed about to say something. "That means you too, Paulie. Now I'll ask you to leave so I can do some paperwork in quietude."

"Wait!" Paulie said, as the sheriff and deputy guided him toward the door. "But I ain't told you the half of it! I got two dead friends and another two in the hospital because of this bitch—!"

"Watch your language," the deputy said.

"Save it for the judge," said the sheriff.

They pushed Paulie out into the street and banged the door shut behind him. His complaints were left to worm their way through the bars, stirring the shafts of dust.

"Now, back to my paperwork," the sheriff said. He plopped down in his chair and pulled the newspaper up to the brim of his outrageous hat. He shook the fold straight and started reading, tsking at some piece of bad news.

"You've gotta be flanking kidding me," Molly said. She looked around the cell, gripping the bars ahead of her; she rattled them in frustration.

"Retirement does this to a man," the prisoner beside her whispered.

"Does *what*?" She turned and faced the man in the neighboring cell, who had lounged back on his cot now that the show was over.

"He ain't been outside in a month," the man said softly. "Least not until he arrested you." He scratched the dark stubble on his chin. "I'm impressed he went *that* far."

Molly stepped closer to the bars to hear better; her Wadi scurried out of her pocket and crept up to its perch behind her neck.

"Full retirement next week," the prisoner said. "Great time to be a crook if it weren't for that damned deputy." He nodded to the younger

man by the window.

"I don't care about any of that," Molly said. "No offense," she added, as she noted the hurt expression on the man's face. "I've got friends in trouble. I need to get out of here!"

The man shrugged and looked up at the ceiling. "Ain't we all?"

Molly turned to the sheriff. "Excuse me," she said. "Look, I know it's not your job to hear out our sides, but don't you need something more than a man's words to hold me here?"

"Sure do," the sheriff said from the other side of his sports section.

"Can I go, then?"

"Nope."

"Well what've you got besides a man's words?" Molly asked.

"His *wounds*," the sheriff said nonchalantly. "Didn't look self inflicted to me. And you got a slight limp, consistent with the sort of blow a knee would take to move a man's nose three inches to the left."

"Ouch," the prisoner said.

"What about—?"

"Self defense? Not a mark on you." The sheriff peeked over his paper. "Unless you wanna count the stain of your habit on that left arm of yours."

"What? No! I don't do drugs. Hell, I don't even drink!"

"Sure do curse a lot, though," the prisoner pointed out.

The sheriff lowered his paper and glared at the other prisoner. "I swear on the heavens, that's the last word I want outta you. And *you*," he nodded to Molly. "You can save your explanations for—" The sheriff leaned forward and squinted at Molly. He slapped his paper down and bolted out of his chair. "Hey, wait a damn second. Didn't I tell you pets weren't allowed in my office?" He strode toward the cells, jabbing the air with his gun-shaped finger. "You were in here the other day, weren't you? Asking about Cripple?"

Molly nodded. "That's right, and I think she's in trouble."

"Aw, hell, Cripple's always in trouble," the deputy said.

"Your pet's gotta go," the sheriff told her.

"No, listen, she's *really* in trouble. I think they're loading her into one of the shuttles, those shuttles that keep getting shot down."

"Ain't just the shuttles getting shot down," the deputy pointed out. "Besides, it's only illegals sent off in them things. Cat was born right here on Lok. Everyone knows she ain't illegal."

"It's not just the illegals," Molly said. "They've got this Ryn guy, and they've got Urg's family—" Molly wracked her brain to think who else, but that was already stretching the population of Callites she personally knew.

"That's crazy," the deputy said. "Why would they—?"

The sheriff waved him off. “You say they’re taking *legals?”* he asked.

Molly nodded. Even if Pete was lying about them rounding up legal Callites, she needed an excuse to have the sheriff look into it.

“You *believe* her?” the deputy asked. “She’s obviously on drugs.”

Sheriff Browne walked over to his desk and rested his hand on his newspaper. “Old man Robbins delivered the paper two days in a row,” he said.

“Yup,” the prisoner agreed.

“What’s strange about that?” the deputy asked. “Robbins prints the damn thing. Course he’d be the one to fill in on a delivery or two.”

The sheriff turned and aimed his “hand” gun at the deputy. “Robbins ain’t walked a route in twenty years.” He made two popping sounds with his mouth, and his extended fingers rocked back with the recoil. “Dontcha think it’s odd he’d suddenly deliver it twice in two days?”

“It’s odd enough the fool’s printing that rubbish,” the prisoner said.

The deputy looked to the prisoner, but nodded rather than hush him up. “Yeah, hard to believe he’s running a press with ships dropping out of the sky. Maybe his Callite delivery boy got hurt in the —”

“Cor,” Sheriff Browne said. “Boy’s name is Cor, and Firehawks don’t fall on the likes of him. He’s too clever for that and too good to turn tail without slipping word to me.”

The deputy took off his hat and waved it in front of his face, which sent the shaft of dust by the window into a tizzy. “You don’t seriously think—?”

“I think I wanna hear what this girl has to say. *After* she puts that pet of hers out in the street, of course. Go open her cell up and get it.” The sheriff pointed his “gun” away from the deputy and toward the lock in front of Molly.

“Sir, I—”

“Open that gate, son, and get that varmint out of there.”

The deputy shook his head. “I’m sorry Sheriff, but I can’t do that.”

Sheriff Browne whirled on the younger man. It seemed he was spun around by the shocking display of obstinacy, like a slug to his shoulder. Molly turned to follow the action and saw that the deputy had drawn his gun. A *real* one.

“Goddamnit, sir. Why couldn’t you take early retirement like I suggested?”

Molly watched the scene from between the bars. Beside her, the prisoner stirred, moving to his own cell door like an eager spectator peering over a balcony. The two of them stood, barely a meter apart,

and silently followed the action.

Or *inaction*, rather.

The sheriff stood there, surveying his deputy with an odd air of detached calm. As for the deputy, the only thing that moved was his hand. It shook, which caused the barrel of his gun to tremble slightly. Molly had no idea what was going on, but something began to perturb the hyperspace out of her Wadi. The small creature crawled around to her collarbone and tried to slither out through the bars. Molly held it back, clutching both hands around the small animal lest it run out into trouble.

After what felt like several minutes of a tense staredown, Molly finally saw a flash of movement from the sheriff: a smile. It slid across his lips and seemed to creep up under his gray mustache.

"Don't do it," the deputy said. He extended his gun out toward the sheriff, and the trembling in his hand increased. "Don't analyze it. Don't even *think* about it. And most important, don't say a thing. I can let you live if I think you don't know." The deputy waved his gun toward the door. "If you stay mum, you can just ride out to that farm you've been dreaming of and never look back."

The sheriff moved fast. So fast, Molly flinched and nearly lost her grip on the Wadi. His hand shot up. It seemed to travel through hyperspace to get there, as if it didn't need to move through the intervening space. Molly peered at his hand and saw it had been formed into the shape of a gun—a double-finger barrel leveled at the deputy. It jabbed forward several times, indicating the man.

"You don't just know… you're involved," said Sheriff Browne.

"You dumb fool," the deputy said. "Just shut your trap and retire in peace." The metal gun came up and was aimed right down the barrel of the sheriff's fleshy one.

Sheriff Browne looked to the shut door. "That's why you brought Paulie in, right? That's why you wrote this up and took it so seriously. And yesterday, you didn't act surprised when Mrs. Thrimble came in to report her maid went missing. You already knew about the Callites."

"Sheriff, I'm gonna need you to cuff yourself to yonder cell." The deputy glanced down at the sheriff's hand. "And stop pointing that at me."

The sheriff raised his arm and sighted past his cocked thumb. "This something you've been setting up for a long while? Been waiting for the old dog to crawl down from the porch and go off and die in solitude?"

"*Down* from the porch? Sheriff, you've been cowering under it for damn near a decade. You've got no idea what goes on in this town. Hell, while you're sitting there behind your armored desk reading

what's on page two, I'm out there creating them headlines on the other side."

"Look at the ruckus *you've* caused," the prisoner whispered to Molly.

She wished she could, but she had her hands full with the Wadi. The thing had gone bonkers on her, trying everything it could to get away. It practically swam through her hands, pushing forward with uncommon strength. Molly had to keep her arms in motion, reaching forward over and over as if climbing a rope while the Wadi slid ever forward. It was like trying to create an infinitely long tunnel, one section at a time, but the damn thing was running faster than she could keep up.

"Hold still," she hissed at it, but for once it didn't seem to heed her voice. A loud bang rang out, breaking her concentration. Molly looked up, expecting the sheriff to be on the floor, but the deputy had just slammed a metal shutter down over one of the windows. He crossed to the other one while both guns maintained their vigilance on one another.

"I always scratched my head over your transfer," the sheriff said. "Couldn't reckon why someone'd leave a cushy spot at immigrations for all the political nonsense this job comes with. That shuttle that went up this morning, it's tied up in this somehow, isn't it?"

"You've got three seconds to put on those handcuffs, old man."

"You think I'm scared of that gun? That's *my* gun. You think I'm scared of death? You think that's why I sit in here and read the funnies?"

"Three."

"Son, you don't know half of what I seen in my day. Or why it depresses me to see what's come of this place."

"Two. I mean it, sir. I will shoot you." The other shutter lowered with a bang, startling Molly even as she watched it happen and had anticipated the noise.

"Ain't my stomach that's weak, boy, it's my heart. It done broke long before *you* came around. That bullet can't stop what ain't there."

"I'm sorry," the deputy said. He pulled up his gun as the sheriff lowered his own. "One—" he said, looking away.

"NO!" Molly yelled. She leaned against the bars and pressed both arms through them as far as they would go. A shot rang out, and so did a Wadi. The latter aimed true, even as the former went wide, the deputy startled by Molly's voice, or perhaps by the flash of movement heading his way, or maybe even some internal weakness.

The next scream came from the deputy as a shimmering blur wrapped itself around his neck. Only… the Wadi didn't seem intent on making herself at *home* there. Unless, of course, making a home

required some grisly form of burrowing.

"Drenards in hyperspace," the prisoner said. "What the flank *is* that?"

Molly screamed, yelling for the world to stop, for the Wadi to stop, but both kept crawling forward. The deputy sank to his knees, quiet now, pawing at his neck with one hand. The other one brought the gun up and pressed it to the vibrating shape below his chin. It wavered there, contemplating the ridiculous: an end to them both. Molly clawed the air and continued to scream, drowning out the flow of cursing from the neighboring cell. The sheriff dashed forward, his pretend gun put away, his hand nothing but a hand. It swiped sideways with dizzying speed, and when the gun went off, a puff of smoke leapt out of its barrel, and a matching cloud drifted down from the wounded ceiling.

Molly collapsed from the suddenness and shock of it all. She sank to her knees and leaned against the bars with her arms wrapped around them. Hugging them. The sheriff stood over the gurgling deputy, a smoking gun in his hand. The Wadi jumped off and ran in a brief circle around the sheriff's feet.

"You go on back," the sheriff said, waving the Wadi away.

The Wadi dutifully obliged, scurrying toward Molly and leaving behind a trail of tiny red prints.

Sheriff Browne turned to her. He slowly placed the deputy's gun inside his empty holster, then patted it fondly like a son returned home from war. Molly looked up and saw him tip his hat in her direction. The Wadi climbed her shirt and curled around her neck. She could feel the creature vibrating with energy, or fear—maybe even excitement.

"We got us a no-pets policy for a reason," Sheriff Brown said. He nodded at her Wadi and tapped his temple. "Wouldn't be so paranoid about critters reading my mind if I didn't know what was in here, myself."

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Cole sat up on the operating table and moved his arm in slow circles. He grimaced from the soreness in his back, his other shoulder, and all the other and *older* parts of himself.

Penny watched him from behind the tray at the foot of his bed. “Looks like you managed to get that new shoulder you always wanted,” she said as she gathered up surgical instruments and power tools—both specked with blood and hydraulic fluid.

Cole looked up, expecting to find her smirking at him, teasing him, but she wore a solemn, sad, expression.

“Would’ve saved it if I could,” Arthur said. He glanced up from his portable computer. “And the next time you overpower the limiters, it’ll be your collarbone and ribs that give way. So please—on behalf of my spares cabinet—don’t do anything like that ever again.”

Cole nodded, suppressing a grin.

Mortimor walked into the operating room with a towel in one hand, his hair sticking up from having recently been soaked and then dried off. “You are one crazy sonofabitch,” he said, shaking his head.

“We were just going over that,” Arthur said, “and attempting to correct some personality defects.”

Mortimor stepped around Penny and came to Cole’s side. He took Cole’s new arm by the wrist and looked it over. “You shore up the collar-bone?” he asked Arthur.

Arthur sighed. “Yes, but please don’t tell him that.”

Mortimor smiled and nodded.

“How did the salvage go?” Arthur asked Mortimor.

The smile faded. “Not good,” he said. “What’s left of the skimmers, usable anyway, could fit in a bucket.”

“Sorry about that,” said Cole.

Mortimor sat on the edge of Cole’s cot and gave him a stern look. “Apology accepted. Now, I don’t know what you were trying to prove, but you don’t rush off by yourself like that. You wait for help, understand?”

Cole peered down at his lap and nodded.

“No more flying solo, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Alright.” Mortimor patted Cole’s knee and stood up. “Having said that, you did good out there. If those two had gotten clear…” Mortimor left the sentence unfinished. He looked from Cole to Arthur.

“Speaking of those two, what *were* they?” Cole turned to Arthur. “Did you make the metal one?”

Arthur laughed and shook his head. “Above my pay grade, I’m

afraid."

"A Bern?"

"Made by the Bern, from what you described. A tool they like to use." Arthur finished his adjustments and put the computer away. He turned to Mortimor. "Maybe we should call off this raid and do another sweep through the crew to look for moles. Among the Humans, especially."

"We can't abort," Mortimor said. He rubbed his beard with the towel and leaned back against the wall. "I talked to the Seer and let her know what happened. She said we should go as planned. Seemed insistent, actually."

Penny finished loading the tools and surgical instruments into a drum sanitizer. She looked up at the mention of the Seer. "Did she say anything else?"

Mortimor glanced her direction, then looked to Cole. "Just that she enjoyed her visit with our new friend here." He set his towel aside and scanned the room. "And…"

"And what?" Penny asked.

Mortimor nodded to Cole. "She reiterated what you told me. She said everyone goes. I've already told Ryke to plan accordingly."

"Everyone goes on the raid?"

"That's right." Mortimor frowned. "She said not to leave anyone behind."

"What does that mean?" Penny asked.

Mortimor shook his head. "I think it means we're done here, for good or bad. It probably means we were too late, or there were too little of us, or that this whole blasted enterprise has been an exercise in futility. It means we're giving up. Running away."

Arthur stepped back, as if physically struck by the words. "Did she say when?"

"As soon as we can. I'm ordering a synchronized sleep schedule effective immediately with a briefing at oh six hundred. No more shifts. No more perimeter defense. Everybody is resting up for this one and it'll be our last."

Arthur shook his head. "I can't sleep. There's too much to do."

"Don't worry. You and I are exempt. Ryke and his boys will be working straight through as well to finish the boxes and make sure they haven't been tampered with in any other way."

"I should go help them," Cole said. He made to get up from the cot, but Mortimor stepped forward and pushed him back.

"Actually, you need to get your rest."

"But those are *my* boxes."

"And you'll be happy to hear you're getting your wish. You've proven yourself in combat, and frankly, we need every able soldier

we've got. So heal up in a hurry. If Arthur clears you, you'll be a part of this wild-ass plan of yours."

"I am?" Cole looked to Arthur for confirmation. "I will be?"

Arthur shrugged.

"Get some sleep," Mortimor said. He picked up his towel and walked away, slapping Arthur on the back as he went. Arthur startled out of whatever he'd been thinking. He shot Cole a brief glance before turning to Penny.

"Better tape up that bandage on his other arm a little tighter, then." He pulled out his computer, gave Cole one more serious look, then turned and hurried after Mortimor.

Penny and Cole were left alone in the small operating room. A machine in the corner whirred softly, its presence revealed by the new silence. Penny pulled her blue gloves off and crossed from the sanitizing machine to a low counter. She fumbled in a drawer, her actions tense and hurried.

"Is everything okay?" Cole asked.

Penny pulled out a roll of tape and slapped it to the counter. Cole cringed as the sharp noise rang out in the small room. He sat quietly while Penny stared down at the back of her hand, which covered the roll of tape.

"If I hadn't noticed the wiring, *none* of this would've happened."

"What?" Cole leaned forward; Penny turned to face him.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She looked at Cole's repaired arm and rubbed the side of her own.

"Are you kidding? Think about what would've happened if you *hadn't* noticed something was wrong. The raid would've gone as planned, and everyone would've jumped to their death."

"I shouldn't have left the room, then. I should've been there to—"

"Don't." Cole shook his head. "Besides, everything worked out fine, right?"

Penny picked up the tape and walked around to the other side of his cot. "I don't know." She untied his surgical gown and folded it down over his shoulder, revealing the pad of gauze that had been lightly taped over his stitches. "They've put a lot of work into this place to be told to abandon it."

"Is this about what the Seer said?"

Penny shrugged. She worked the end of the tape loose and began shoring up the bandage over his deep cut. "It's weird to even be talking about her without going up on the roof." She adhered a piece of tape to the pad and scratched at the roll to tease up the torn end. "Everything's changing."

"Is it something *I* did?" Cole waited for Penny to meet his gaze. "I screwed things up, didn't I?"

“How should I know? All I know is a lot of people have died to keep this place together, and now Mortimor’s talking about abandoning it.”

“You’re supposed to tell me this isn’t my fault,” Cole said.

Penny looked to the side. “I don’t know that it’s not.”

Cole pushed her hands away from his wound. “Leave me be,” he said. “In fact, I think you should leave the room.”

Penny slapped his hands in return. She threw the tape in his lap and turned to leave, then whirled on him. Leaning forward, she grasped his shoulders with both hands and brought her face close to his. Cole gasped in pain.

“You leave *me* be!” Penny hissed. “Get out of my head!”

Cole stared at her with his mouth open, his vision blurred with tears of physical agony.

“You’re hurting me,” he said.

Penny let go. She stood up and looked at her palms, then whispered something to herself.

Cole looked to his real shoulder and saw that the bandage had been torn loose by her grasp; the stitches were leaking blood.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Cole didn’t say anything. He watched as Penny surveyed her hands, turning them over and back, checking all sides of herself. “It’s just—I feel stupid around you. I feel—”

“I’m in love with someone,” Cole said.

Penny nodded. “I know. And it wouldn’t matter, anyway. I just hate myself for feeling out of control.”

“*You* hate yourself? How do you think *I* feel? One minute I’m being called the chosen one by a group of people trying to eradicate us, which makes me wonder what the hell I was chosen for. The next, it sounds like I’m screwing up the plans of a guy I’m doing every damn thing to win the respect of—”

“Mortimor?”

Cole nodded.

“Well, you can stop.”

“Yeah, I’m sensing that.”

“No, I mean the guy already loves you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Trust me. I know what it looks like.”

Cole pressed his bandage back in place and picked up the tape.

“Here, let me,” Penny said. “It’s hard to do stuff like that until your new fingers sort themselves out.”

Cole allowed her to take the tape. He looked down at his fingers and rubbed the pads of them together.

“Do you remember the first time you saw me?” Cole asked.

"Of course."

"Where was it? Or… *when* was it?"

"I was in the skimmer that picked you up. Don't you remember? I performed CPR on you for most of the trip back here. And then there was the surgery. You almost didn't make it, you know. Pretty bad hypothermia. Your lips—" Penny glanced up at his face, then looked back to her work. "They were completely black."

"After that, was there any time—were we ever *alone* together?"

Penny tore a strip of tape in two and affixed it over the gauze and to his flesh. "I don't get what you're asking."

Cole leaned back against his pillow. "So some of it was a dream, then."

Penny laughed. "Probably. You were rambling a lot."

"What was I saying?"

"Nonsense. Gibberish. It was all in Spanish."

It was Cole's turn to laugh. "Portuguese," he said.

"Whatever." Penny finished her work and stood back. She looked him over, the sad expression still on her face. "Get some sleep," she told him. She turned to go.

"Hey, wait."

Penny stopped. She turned her head to the side.

"What?" she asked.

"Maybe it's a good thing, the Seer telling us to all go. Maybe it can be interpreted a different way."

"The way you *want* to hear it, right?"

"I'm just saying, the fact that the next fight might be our last…"

"Yeah?"

"Well," Cole said, "it still leaves open the question of whether or not we'll *win."*

Penny stood still for a moment. She reached up and pulled an elastic band off her bunned-up hair, allowing it to spill down and across her shoulders. Turning, she locked Cole's gaze with her own, and he saw the barest of smiles flirt with the corners of her mouth.

"Yeah," she said, "I like that." Penny nodded. "I like that a lot."

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"Well, I'm sure glad *that's* over," the prisoner said. He watched as the sheriff opened the cell door for Molly and waved her out. "I'll be gods-awful glad to get free of *this* joint."

Sheriff Browne turned to him. "What in hyperspace does a lick of *this* have to do with you robbing a buggy dealership?"

The prisoner scratched his beard. "I was hoping you could tell me!"

"Not a damn thing, that's what. Now sit down and shut up. Next time I shoot you, it won't be with my fingers."

The prisoner shot a finger of his own up at the ceiling, but backed away as he did so. The sheriff turned and regarded his dead deputy. "Looks like your pet done finished what you started last night."

"How did you do that?" Molly asked. She looked from the deputy to the Wadi on her shoulder, suddenly fearful to be reminded of what her pet could do. She flashed back to the fight on the Drenard shuttle when she'd last seen its ferocious side and tried to tease out what the two events had in common.

"I've always had a way with animals," Sheriff Browne said. "A way that tends toward trouble."

"So, am I free to go?" Molly glanced at the office door and thought about dashing out of there, just to get away from the residual tension she could feel coursing through her body. It was hard to believe she'd *wanted* to come there.

"Way I see it, this is now animal control's jurisdiction." The sheriff smiled at her. That smile faded as he looked back to the mess on the office floor. "But who's gonna clean this up if the Callites keep going missing?"

"The Callites," Molly said. "That's why I came to see you. Some of my friends are in trouble."

"Hardly surprising." The sheriff looked down at his poor deputy. "Trouble seems to follow you around, don't it?"

Molly frowned. "I think they might be in *big* trouble. Like I said before, another shuttle is supposedly going up today, and they might be on it."

The sheriff stepped around his deputy, casting the body a forlorn look. He threw open one of the shutters and peered outside at the bustle on the busy street. "Never could stand what they were doing there at immigrations, even *before* the damned things were being shot down. But I had no right to inquire. The law is the law."

"Just because it's the law doesn't make it right," Molly said. She held the Wadi to her chest and went to the door. She opened it up to

let in some light and let *out* some of the stuffiness created by the dead body.

"Then again," the sheriff said, "if *legals* are being shipped off, like Cripple for instance…"

"Will you at least come with me and check? Because I'm going either way."

The sheriff leaned on the windowsill and peered out through the haze of sunlit dust, his shoulders pressed up around his ears in a frozen shrug.

"Is it hard to think about going outside?" Molly asked.

The sheriff turned to her and laughed. "He meant it as a figure of speech. Whadya think, I sleep in here? I get out twice a day, to and from work. Hell, I arrested you right over yonder." The sheriff pointed out the window to the sidewalk a dozen paces away.

"So you'll come with me?"

The sheriff nodded. "I suppose so. As long as you don't mind riding on the back of my Theryl." He pulled his hat down snug, patted his holster, took one last look at his dead deputy, then turned to the door.

"Theryl?" Molly asked. "What in the galaxy is *that?"*

••••

A monstrous horse-like animal, apparently. The sheriff led the large creature out of its stall and into the alley. He clucked at it affectionately, and the animal turned and looked down to survey Molly with its single eye.

"Hello," she said, waving. "*Nice* Theryl."

"Her name's Clementine," the sheriff said. He patted the animal on the neck. "Come back here and I'll give you a lift."

Molly hurried around to the other side of the sheriff and moved the Wadi to the back of her neck. The sheriff reached up and engaged a switch on the saddle. The rear of the leather seat opened up, and a second, smaller seat extended out its back as another pair of stirrups unspooled. "Up you go," he said, creating a basket with his hands.

Molly let him boost her up. She threw a leg over the small saddle, and the Theryl shifted beneath her. She held on to the handles to either side of her seat and wondered how the sheriff was going to get up. She leaned to the side and watched as he stepped into a lowered stirrup, which began sucking up into the saddle, lifting him into place.

"And away we go," the sheriff said. He clucked his tongue, and Clementine sauntered down the alley. At the end, the animal turned left, its hooves clomping loudly on the wooden sidewalk.

“Not today, old girl.” The sheriff pulled gently on the reins, turning the Theryl the other direction. “Bit of business for us oldtimers left to do.”

With that, he snapped the reins, and the Theryl threw her head back. She let out a whistle, a trilling call more like a bird’s than any mammal Molly knew of. Her front hooves left the sidewalk for a moment and waved excitedly in the air. And then they were off—tearing down the dusty street, weaving through traffic, with Molly and the Wadi holding on for dear life.

The sheriff and Theryl moved as one, leaving Molly to move awkwardly as something else. She let go of the useless little handles and wrapped her arms around the sheriff’s waist. She managed half a yelp as they picked up speed, the Wadi’s tail wrapping around her neck and squeezing off the rest of her outburst. All around her was the thunder of Theryl hooves and the strange and sickening rise and fall of its peculiar gait.

Molly concentrated on the rhythm of the beast and tried to move *with* it instead of fighting it. Each corner they rounded threw her timing off as everything leaned to one side or the other. After dozens of blocks flew by, the sheriff yelled something, and Clementine pulled to a halt in a staccato of clocking hooves.

“There,” the sheriff said. He pointed to a squat building at the end of the road, out on the edge of town. A tall fence studded with lookout towers ringed the structure; inset into this was a small guard station, which seemed to offer the only access through.

“Flank!” The sheriff’s arm came up, his finger tracking something rising from behind the building. The roar of the shuttle’s thrusters hit them moments after the realization they’d arrived too late.

“No!” Molly yelled. She tried to scream more, but the sheriff nudged the Theryl forward, and she had to hold tight to his back. The animal moved at a furious pace, making the previous jaunt seem like a stroll by comparison. Even the roar of distant thrusters couldn’t match the raw fury roiling beneath them.

Holding fast, Molly wondered if they weren’t better off heading back to Parsona and giving chase in the atmosphere. What good was the sheriff expecting to do? Arrest the department of immigration? That would be too late for her friends. She peeked under his armpit and saw the world ahead in brief flashes each time his hands came up with the reins. He steered right for the guard gate, urging the Theryl to dizzying speeds with loud “ha’s!” Ahead, the wall of steel wire and coiled razor jounced a dozen meters closer with each glimpse.

Molly tried to yell for him to stop, but the Wadi and the raw speed clutched her breath. She visualized all of them smeared across the fencing and wondered if the sheriff planned something as foolish

as ramming the thing down—

Suddenly, the Theryl's gait stuttered, almost as if it had come to the same realization. Its hooves skipped, its back sank down, and it took two strides that felt *different*. Then the rear legs of the animal flew up, lashing out straight to either side so quickly that Molly felt her stomach sink as her chin was pressed down to her chest. She grabbed her own wrists around the sheriff's waist and squealed as the Theryl jolted into the sky, the rough gallop gone in a buzz of whipping wind.

Opening her eyes a crack, Molly caught a brief glimpse of the Theryl's four legs spread to either side, a thin flap of skin stretched out between them and catching the air. Below, the coils of razor wire passed in silence, the Theyrl's leathery wings waving at the fence with mock indifference.

The gliding seemed to draw out forever before the legs reached for the ground, the flap closing up over its belly, and the thunder of hooves on packed dirt resuming. Molly felt her spine compress with the landing; her teeth clapped shut as her jaw hit her sternum. She fought to secure her grip on the sheriff and peeked through his armpit with her tear-streaked eyes. She saw the squat building looming directly ahead, the fence having been cleared with an impossible leap.

"Whoa!" the sheriff yelled.

Molly leaned back as he pulled the reins; the thunder faded to drums and then to a steady knocking. The sheriff threw one leg over the Theryl's head and jumped off to the ground. He turned and held out his hands as Molly slid down after him.

"A little warning next time?"

He smiled at her as he rubbed the large animal's neck. "First time on one?"

"First and last, I hope." Molly truly meant it. The Theryl turned and snorted at her, its wide whiskers making it seem sage and comical at once.

"Alright," the sheriff said. He glanced back toward the guard gate, which was suspiciously lacking in the activity department. "Let's poke our heads in and ask some questions." He looked up at the fading roar of the shuttle, the white hull perched atop a column of thick smoke. "Maybe we can convince them to turn that thing around—"

The sheriff fell silent; he shielded his eyes to look up through the glare of morning sun. Molly did the same and immediately noticed the odd gap in the shuttle's exhaust, the dash of blue sky between puffs of interrupted smoke. The shuttle stood high above, sideways, its thrusters dark and quiet. The craft grew larger as it began its slow descent—its plummet to the prairies of Lok.

"Hyperspace!" the sheriff cursed. He drew his pistol and

continued to watch the shuttle fall toward the horizon. Molly wondered what he thought he was going to do with the weapon, if it was just a reaction to danger, or perhaps a desire to put something near death out of its misery.

"We're too late," Molly said as the Wadi cowered against her neck, its scales scratching her like course sandpaper.

The sheriff glanced at the nearby entrance to the building and reached inside a saddlebag. He pulled out a dozen long plastic strips, the same kind Molly used to secure hoses in the thruster room.

"If there were legals on that shuttle," he said, "that gives us the right to arrest them." He handed the strips of plastic to Molly. "Consider yourself deputized."

Molly swallowed hard, an image of the last deputy flashing back in her vision. Before she could object to her new role, the sheriff strode off, walking to the door with a stride of purpose and vigor she hadn't seen in his carriage around the office.

"Hey, wait," Molly said, hurrying after him. "Shouldn't I have a gun or something?"

"No, you don't need a gun." The sheriff paused at the door and peeked through the glass, cupping one of his hands by the side of his face. He grabbed the knob and turned to Molly. "Just stay behind me. We're here to arrest them, not kill them."

Molly nodded. She looked at the quickcuffs he'd handed her and figured she'd still feel better with a gun.

"Let's go," the sheriff said.

He pulled open the door and stepped inside. Molly followed him into a dimly lit foyer; she let the door slam shut behind her. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw an empty reception desk at the end of the hall with a set of double doors beyond it. The sheriff strolled across the room and glanced behind the desk. He placed one hand on the set of doors and turned his head to the side.

"Let me do the talking."

Molly nodded once more.

With that, the sheriff pushed open the doors to the immigrations building. He and Molly stepped inside, expecting to find a labyrinth of cubicles, or perhaps a maze of tiled hallways studded with fluorescently lit offices. Either option would've felt familiar and would've matched the cliché of a large building built on bureaucracy.

As the doors yawned wide, however, the sheriff cursed out loud at the sight that greeted them. It wasn't the office building Molly had expected. And yet, it was a sight more familiar. More *sickeningly* familiar.

"Flank me," Sheriff Browne whispered.

Before them lay a room of high beds, most of which were

occupied by prone figures. What Molly was drawn to, however, were the bags. Rows and rows of them hung from the beds, many of them already full of blue Callite blood.

"Holy shit," she said.

She was so focused on the bags, on all the blue spirals of blood flowing from strapped arms and through the tubes that she was barely cognizant of the flurry of activity. About ten workers, their aprons splattered blue, cried out in alarm and rushed toward Molly and Sheriff Browne. The first gunshot startled her out of her shocked reverie. Molly flinched and dropped the bundle of plastic strips. One of the men running their way spun around, his arm flying akimbo, a bright, wet wound flashing out on his shoulder before he fell behind a gurney.

BLAM!

Another shot, and another man twirling from the impact. Browne held the gun straight ahead and lined up for another squeeze of the trigger. He fired again, and Molly found herself ducking from the noise, her hands going to her ears. Two more rapid shots, and Browne started backing up, yelling something to Molly, but her ears were ringing from being so close to the gun's report.

One last loud bang, and the sheriff lowered his gun and started fumbling with it. Molly glanced through the smoke from the shots, the smell of spent gunpowder tickling her nose. Slowly, gradually, the world around her came back into focus. She watched Brown's lips move beneath his mustache, saw him cursing at his gun. She watched him drop a handful of shells; they spun toward the floor and bounced and rattled there.

Molly looked back up at the remaining workers running their way. They came around the last row of gurneys topped with draining Callites, yelling and jostling and full of rage. Molly's ears continued to ring. She remained frozen in place, watching events as if through another's eyes. Her gaze fell to a nearby Callite, who was lifting her head and looking Molly's way.

It was Cat. Her lips were moving.

"Run," she was shouting.

Molly could hear it, now. Could match up the ringing in her ears with the movement of Cat's lips.

"Run."

But the men were already upon them.

••••

The first man headed straight for Sheriff Browne, tackling him

before he could reload. He crawled on top of the older man and began pummeling him senseless. Molly moved to help—she felt the Wadi fly from her neck—when a figure reached her at a dead run, his fist a blur.

Molly ducked and twisted out of the way just in time, letting the man fly past; his splattered denim coveralls barely registering in the back of her mind as something she should recognize.

Two more men scrambled around Cat's gurney to join the fray. There was a shout from behind her, and Molly turned in time to see her Wadi slung by its tail and thrown down against the tiled floor. The creature went limp, and the man, his neck bleeding, went back to pounding on the sheriff.

Someone slammed into Molly's back, sending her flying forward. She landed near her limp Wadi and was unable to take her eyes off it. She felt a rage coursing up inside, filling her up. A man stood over her, his boots planted to either side. He reached down to seize her, to drag her up, and Molly let him. She let him pull her up by her collar while she kept her body limp and half balled-up. As soon as her feet came under her, she kicked off the floor, jumping straight up as hard as she could, sending her head into the man's nose.

His screams seemed to frighten off the ringing in her ears. The world returned to a normal speed as it resumed making noises. The man over a limp Sheriff Browne turned and realized the fight wasn't over. He stood to join the others as Molly backed toward Cat's gurney.

"I got this!" the man with the bleeding nose said, but the other men kept creeping forward. Molly finally recognized one of them as being Pete. She watched him spit through a sneer as she circled Cat's gurney. She reached for the straps across her friend and started fumbling with them. The man she'd attacked lunged forward and grabbed at her wrists, forcing her to stop and pull them back.

"Nose!" Cat yelled.

Her head lifted off the gurney and turned to Molly.

"Now!"

The man was still leaning over Cat, his hands on her straps. Molly reared her fist back and threw her shoulders into the punch. She cracked the man on his already bleeding nose and felt a jolt of pure pain shoot through her knuckles and waver up her arm.

"Palms!" Cat said. "Use your palms!"

Molly obeyed and threw her left palm after the last punch. She struck him with the heel of her hand, using her armbones like battering rams. The blow slammed into the man's face as he was already falling forward from the last blow. His head bounced off Cat's stomach and flew back; his body crumpled on the other side of the gurney. Molly shook her right hand and watched as the other three

men strode forward.

"Fight their joints," Cat told her. Her voice was solid and unwavering, despite her condition.

"What?" Molly looked around for something to wield as a weapon, or someone to help her, but it was just a sea of still bodies and blue bags.

"You aren't fighting *them*," Cat said. "Just their joints. Pick a joint and fight *it*."

One of the guys rounded Cat's table and swiped at Molly. She bobbed her head under the blow and circled away, all the while pondering what Cat was saying and trying to remember everything she'd learned in her Naval combat classes.

The figure yelled something to the other two, keeping them at bay. He lashed out with a spinning kick meant to decapitate Molly. She fell into a crouch as his boot whizzed by, then lunged forward with her own foot. She caught him on the side of the knee as hard as she could and watched him wobble backward.

Molly turned to see what the other two men were doing—

"Forget them," Cat said. "They'll come one at a time."

"Why?" Molly yelled. She danced to the side as the enraged worker shot forward, his attacks angry and telegraphed. As he passed by—his fists attacking the space where she just was—she threw the ball of her knee into the side of the same leg she'd already attacked. The man roared and fell to the ground, clutching his leg. Molly lined it up like a Galaxy Ball and kicked his knee as hard as she could with the steel toe of her flightboot. The man gurgled with pain, but a kick to his chin cut the sound off.

"Why? Because they're men," Cat said. "They don't prove themselves in groups."

Before Molly could work on the straps across Cat, one of the workers shoved Pete in the chest, pushing him away from the action. The figure came forward in a boxing stance, his hands high as he bounced on the balls of his feet.

"What now?" Molly asked.

"Can you wrestle?"

The man bounced forward and his hand disappeared. Molly felt it crack her cheek, and she saw sparks. She jumped back, but two more swift jabs landed in a flurry, one to her nose and another to her ribs. The man hopped around and showboated with his fists while Molly held her nose, bent over, blood leaking through her fingers.

"Get off your feet!" Cat yelled.

Molly glanced over and saw Cat straining against her restraints, her arms tensed and popping with wiry muscles. She had her head turned to the side to follow the fighting. The man darted forward, his

hands coming up in front of him to unleash another blistering combination—

Molly dove at his waist and wrapped her arms around him. She brought one foot behind his heel and kept pressing forward, putting her weight and momentum into his thighs. The boxer waved his arms in the air, but couldn't keep himself upright. They both went back and crashed into the floor, his head cracking the tiles loudly.

"Elbows!" Cat yelled.

Molly pulled herself up to the guy's chest while he busied himself clutching the back of his head. She bent her arm in half, keeping her fists up by her shoulders. She twisted back at the waist, then unloaded with an elbow across his chin. The man's eyes rolled back. She hit him with another, just to be sure, and his arms fell to the side, limp.

"Enough!" Pete yelled.

Molly stood up from her latest victim and turned around. Pete stood behind Cat's table, a silver blade twinkling against the Callite's neck.

"Thought I told you to stay put," Pete said. "Now get your arms behind your head before I spill what's left of her blood."

Cat met Molly's gaze and smiled. One of her eyes scissored shut in a Callite wink. "After he kills me, kick his ass," Cat said.

"Shut it," Pete said. His arm tensed, and Molly could see the blade bite into Cat's neck.

Cat's smile broadened.

"Attack the joints," she said. "Concentrate on the wrist with the knife."

"I said shut it!"

The knife bit deeper and blue leaked out with force.

"And don't you come closer!" Pete yelled at Molly. "Get your hands behind your head!"

Molly didn't know who to listen to. She put her hands in the air, not willing to be responsible for Cat's death. "I'm a sheriff's deputy, Pete. Think about what you're doing. Think about the *next* Pete."

The man at her feet groaned as he came to. Molly stepped away from him, which made Pete flinch. "Stay where you are," he told her. "Hey, Mickie, you okay? I need you to check the others."

The man rolled over and pushed himself up to his hands and knees. "What happened?" he groaned, his hand coming up to the back of his head.

"You got your ass kicked by a chick, that's what. Now get up and see how Ryan's doing. He ain't moved at all."

"Don't let him up," Cat told Molly. "You've got the numbers, now. Don't lose them."

"Shut it!" Pete yelled. He pulled the knife away and held it over

Cat's chest, vertically. Molly watched as his other hand came up and gripped the hilt, both arms high over his head.

"Do it!" Cat yelled. She screamed, a long, piercing scream that shivered through Molly's bones.

Molly watched in horror as the knife plunged down, the silver flash of steel disappearing in Cat's chest up to the hilt. The man on the floor was on all-fours, groping for his senses. Molly threw her flightboot into his chin, making his search a little more difficult. As he collapsed into another silent heap, Molly dashed toward Cat, only she and Pete still standing.

With much effort, Pete wrested the blade out of Cat's chest, pulling a fountain of blue with it. Molly slid under the gurney, feet-first, and aimed for his knees, impacting with a solid crunch. Pete yelled and tumbled straight down on top of her, his weight forcing her flat. Molly tried to twist her hips out from underneath him, tried to push up on his shoulders, but he wouldn't budge. He threw a forearm across her neck and leaned into it, squeezing her airway down.

Molly gurgled and pushed at his shoulders. The knife came up, hovering behind Pete's purple-glazed snarl. Molly's body tensed in fear as it slid through the air and buried itself in her chest. It hit with a bang, with a sonic explosion, and Molly could smell spent gunpowder in the air.

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Pete sagged down, his grotesque body limp with death. Molly tried to push him off, but her one arm was numb and useless. She shoved at him with her other one, grunting with effort, when his weight finally shifted. As Pete's head rolled away, Molly saw Sheriff Browne's on the other side, his face busted up, but the barest of smiles showing beneath his bloodstained mustache.

That smile sealed up when he saw the knife sticking out of her chest. Molly opened her mouth to say something, but all she could do was gasp. The pain was like a tunnel of cold air rigged up inside her, a hollow ache that pulled on her senses. Browne knelt by her side and placed one hand on her chest, the knife between the crook of his thumb and finger. He grasped the hilt with his other hand and pulled and pushed at the same time, sliding the weapon out.

Molly grunted from the pain and fought back the blackness swirling around her vision. The knife made a slick, sucking sound and came out coated with a purple mix of bloods. Her head fell back as Browne put pressure on the wound. She watched through heavy, slow-blinking lids as he tugged his bandana from around his neck and

tucked it under his palm.

"Can you hold this?" he asked.

Molly nodded weakly, but she wasn't sure if she could. Browne took both her hands and placed them over the bandage. He disappeared from her vision and staggered toward the tables. Over her throbbing pulse, Molly could hear leather straps flap back and metal buckles click together. She craned her neck to see what he was doing, but everywhere she looked, she saw with the tunnel vision of the half conscious. The world moved on the other side of a pinhole. Sheriff Browne flashed across the other side of that hole, moving from Cat's gurney to another one further away.

Cat slid from her table to Molly's side, her face filling Molly's vision. Cat's hands wrapped around Molly's and pulled back the bandage. She put it back and helped apply pressure. "You're gonna be fine," she said. Cat looked up and scanned the room with a frown.

"My Wadi," Molly whispered.

Cat looked over her shoulder. She patted Molly's arm and moved away. Molly grunted and forced herself to one elbow, then struggled to sit up. She glanced back and wiggled toward one of the gurney's legs, propping herself up to better see what was going on. She concentrated on pushing the blackness into the corners of her vision.

She regretted her efforts immediately when she saw what Cat was doing.

The Callite crouched over the Wadi with the blood-soaked knife. She had one of the creature's arms splayed out—the blade resting against it, the palm of her hand flat against the dull side, as if about to apply pressure.

Molly managed a weak *"No"* as Cat shoved down on the blade, severing the limb. The sight of it nearly finished what her own wound had started—Molly could feel her consciousness try and slip away, could feel the black surge toward the center of her vision. She tried to call out to Cat, but managed just hoarse whispers as the Callite wiped the blade on the animals stump and leg before pressing them back together.

"What are you doing?" Molly croaked.

She clutched the sticky bandana to her chest and leaned forward, moving to her knees. She crawled closer to Cat and the Wadi, limping along with one hand.

"What have you done?"

Cat shook her head. When she turned, Molly saw tears dripping out of the alien's eyes. Her lids scissored shut rapidly, but not quick enough to keep up with the flow of sadness.

"Shoulda seen it all along," Cat muttered. She continued to hold the Wadi's wound fast as she turned and surveyed the room. Molly

crawled up next to her and looked down at the lifeless Wadi.

"So flanking obvious," Cat said.

Molly fell to the side, resting on her hip; she turned and looked across the room. Sheriff Browne continued to move deeper through the sea of tables, leather straps swaying beneath the gurneys of those he'd already freed. Several Callites moved about as well, often clutching surfaces as if dizzy or weak. Molly saw more than a few straps hanging limp beneath bodies that did not stir at all.

Molly shook her head. "I don't understand," she said.

"Ain't about votes," Cat told her. "Weren't never about votes."

Molly looked down at the rag in her hands, soaked purple with her blood and Cat's. She glanced over at Pete's still form, the sheen of purplish grease coating his skin and splotching his apron in long streams.

"It's a drug," Molly said. "They're making a drug!"

"No. It's worse than that. And I'm a flanking fool for just now seeing it." Cat shook her head. "It's no wonder the stuff reeks of death."

"What? What is it?" Molly asked.

"This is what you've been looking for." Cat held up the knife, which was coated in their combined blood. "This is Lok's version of fusion fuel."

Molly sat in numbed silence, her wound and head throbbing. She heard Callites crying in the background amid the staccato of their desperate footsteps. She heard the mixture of relief and grief, both wailed in sadness, as loved ones took stock of who had made it and who had not. Her mind reeled with what Cat was saying. It didn't even register when one of the Wadi's arms twitched.

"Look," Cat said.

A tail swished feebly, and Molly's breath caught in her throat. She gasped and reached with both arms, forgetting her own wound. Cat passed the animal to her, saying something about being careful of its leg.

Molly nodded and cradled the animal, holding it against her chest. She felt the tears well up as it nuzzled against her, stirring in a confused awakening. "I thought I lost her," Molly cried. "Lost her before I even got a chance to name her."

Cat squeezed her shoulder and stood up. "I need to see to the others," she said.

Molly sniffled and nodded. The Wadi reached out and gripped her shirt with its tiny claws, holding itself close. Twin tongues flicked out, both of them wavering in the air.

"It's okay," Molly told the Wadi.

"Everything's gonna be fine," she lied.

50

Cole fidgeted in place, his body practically vibrating with anxious nerves. Ahead of him stood two other soldiers in white combat uniforms: a Callite, and a creature whose name and race he'd already forgotten. Behind him stood another human, and four other lines were arranged parallel to theirs—three to one side with four people each, and one to the other side with just three. Various races chattered amongst themselves up and down the lines, the pre-raid jitters reminding Cole of old Academy briefings before big simulator missions.

The only members of the raid groups who seemed calm were the pilots. They sat perfectly still on the hyperdrive platforms, their arms curled around their shins and their heads up to watch the console operators. Cole felt small and lost with the incredible diversity of the races present and how much more experience they seemed to have. He peered past the crouching pilots where five other jump platforms had been arranged, each holding one of the cages Cole had designed.

"You nervous?" the guy behind Cole asked.

Cole turned and nodded. "Anxious, yeah. Mostly that my idea doesn't get people killed."

"It'll work," the guy said.

"I'm Cole." He extended his hand.

"I know. We met in orientation." The man smiled. "Don't worry, there was a lot going on and I'm pretty forgettable. I'm Larken, the translator."

"The guy who speaks Bern."

Larken laughed. "Well enough. I used to hang with the wrong crowd, I guess you could say."

Cole laughed. "Me too, a long time ago. Hey, at least we're here now."

"Yeah. Anyway, good luck in there. I'll be right behind you, so clear out fast."

"Don't worry about that," Cole said. He considered passing the message up the line.

"Listen up!" Mortimor yelled. He clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "We've got coordinates coming in now, so get ready! Remember, you've got three seconds to get out of the way before the next guy comes through. That's as much as we can risk with a moving target, but it'll probably feel like a lifetime as hopped up as you all are. Now, those of you in line, get on the platform fast and get out of the way quick once you arrive. Hit your quadrants and hit them hard. Pilots and navigators, secure the cockpits as swiftly as possible. We're sending you as close as we can to the forward midline

of each ship, so it should give you a short run. If you end up in mechanical spaces, be judicious about what you cut through, we need these puppies operational."

He shifted his gaze to the back row. "Translators, stay *alive*. No heroics. Everyone's redundant except for you."

The lights over the platforms went from red to amber.

"Good luck!" Mortimor yelled. The tenor in his voice sent a wave of goosebumps down Cole's arms. Mortimor jumped down from the platform and went to the back of the line next to Cole's, completing its full complement of four—five, counting the seated pilot.

Larken squeezed Cole's shoulder, then patted it twice. "Good luck!"

Cole grabbed his buckblade from its holster. He made sure he had it facing the right direction and that the safety was on. He looked over at Mortimor. "I didn't know you were going."

"Ran out of people that speak Bern. Now pay attention." Mortimor nodded toward the platforms.

Cole looked.

The light over the pilots went green. There was a loud beeping sound followed by a pop of displaced air, and the cages in the back of the room vanished.

The pilots sitting on the platforms followed soon after, winking out of existence. The row of navigators jumped into position, taking the place of the pilots and falling to their butts. They wrapped their various species' version of arms around their legs and fell still.

Penny was the navigator in Mortimor's line. He watched wisps of red hair spill out of her hood as she settled into place. Their eyes met right before her head went down—then she disappeared from the room.

It was all happening so fast. Cole's heart fluttered as he took a step forward. He chanced a glance to the side, at the neighboring line. Mortimor was looking straight ahead. He wished he'd known the old man was going; he would've switched places with someone to be in his group so he'd be able to keep an eye on him.

The lines surged forward again, and he felt Larken's hand on his back, pushing.

Another pop of displaced air. Cole stood beside the console operator, right in front of the platform. Marx, the Callite plopping down ahead of him, looked up, and time slowed to a crawl. Cole watched the alien's arms wrap around his shins, his scaly chin tuck down—and then he was gone.

Cole jumped up to the platform and sat down as quick as he could. He spun around to face what he hoped would be an exit once he popped out of hyperspace. In the back of his mind, he counted:

Three.

He grabbed his shins and tucked his head, squeezing his sword as tight as he dared without crushing it.

Two.

The last thing that flashed through his mind, right before he popped out of the room, was the Bern Seer. He couldn't help but recall the last conversation they'd had, and a sickening sensation clawed at his stomach as he wondered if this was all one colossal mistake—

One…

51

Parsona settled in the clearing, her struts once again sagging under the weight of a full load of haggard survivors. Molly lifted her visor; she could hear the cargo bay's loading ramp opening up behind her. She watched as Cat crawled out of the nav seat and over the control console to go and help the others. Molly unbuckled her own flight harness and spoke to her mother:

"Once we get everything unloaded, I'll be back and we can get out of here."

"Excellent," her mom said. "Don't forget the welding goggles."

"I won't," Molly promised.

Molly jumped out of her seat and hurried back to the cargo bay where an eerily familiar scene greeted her: a weary and traumatized group jostled its way into the clearing, the sounds of their shuffles and cries reverberating through *Parsona's* hulls.

The difference this time was that they weren't alone. Outside, Molly could see Scottie conferring with several of the carrier's crewmembers; *Gloria's* survivors had already begun tending to the drained and exhausted Callites. The food and water meant for one group of survivors went around to all, and the profusion of blankets and seated groups multiplied, combined, grew, and became diverse.

Molly reached down and grabbed a crate of vegetables from Walter, who was helping hoist items up from the deep cargo pods. The boy had worked wonders haggling for supplies throughout Bekkie, while Molly, Cat, and Scottie had tended to the Callites, debating about where to take them.

"Keep one week's worth of supplies for four people," Molly instructed him. "The rest will remain here."

Walter frowned and his face lost some of its luster, but he eventually nodded his assent.

"We'll lift off as soon as everything is unloaded," she said. "Make sure we're clear, okay? No stowaways."

Walter nodded. "Okay."

Molly lifted the crate of food and joined the chain of people making their way outside. At the bottom of the ramp, she met Saunders, who took the crate from her and walked toward a blanket already pinned down by staged supplies.

"I'm guessing there's quite some story to go with all these people," Saunders said.

"You won't believe me."

"C'mon. It can't be worse than the last thing you let me in on."

Molly gave Saunders a look that made his eyes widen.

"Really?" He set the vegetables down and stepped out of the way as more food and material arrived. Molly pulled him aside.

"You remember what my parents were sent here for?"

"Illicit fusion fuel."

"Right. Do you remember anything else from that folder? Another case they were working on?"

Saunders stared down at his feet and rubbed his chin. "I do remember something else."

"Missing people."

He snapped his fingers and pointed at Molly. "That's right."

Molly turned to watch the columns of Humans and Callites work to unload her ship. "Might as well have been the same case," she said.

"What do you mean?"

Molly let out her breath in a long, exhausted stream, then shook her head. "The organisms, the stuff fusion fuel is made of, it's in the water here on Lok. Cat and Scottie think this might be the very planet the stuff first originated from."

"Fusion fuel?"

She faced Saunders, and in his scowl, Molly saw that he was as clueless as most of the galaxy on where the stuff came from. Even admirals, it seemed, weren't privy to its manufacture.

"It's a microorganism, a unique creature that can see and move through hyperspace. It's attracted to water, and to light, but mostly to *life*. It's why so many of the species of our galaxy are similar—they've been sharing information, interbreeding, feeding off the same stuff for billions of years."

"And you're sure about this?"

"Yeah. My friends have been unwitting participants in this mess. Only, they never knew where the ingredients they were mixing came from." Molly shook her head. "Another thing I'm sure of is that these creatures are in the water. That's probably how it gets in our blood. Cat thinks it changes something, that it makes the fuel interact within our bodies in some way." Molly reached up and stroked the Wadi under her chin. "I believe her. I've seen what it can do."

"*Can* do? You mean besides moving ships through space?"

Molly looked up at him. "I think it can be like a drug, or some kind of medicine. I don't know. But these Callites, they were bleeding them to make it. And there were hyperdrives in this place—" Molly shook her head. "It looked like they were sending one variety of this stuff off to hyperspace—"

"Do *what?"* Saunders ran his hands up the sides of his face. *"Why?"*

Molly shrugged. "I think Cat knows, but she won't say. My guess is it's something traumatic. Scotties says he's never seen her so shaken

up. But we're pretty sure they were sending it to hyperspace. We found the jump drives and the coordinates of the last delivery." Molly didn't feel like explaining how the center of Lok was a sensible place to "send" things.

Saunders turned and watched the Callites and his crewmen intermingle and help arrange supplies. "So, what now?"

"Now? Now you get some rest. A Callite will be coming out tomorrow by buggy. His name is Ryn, and he's trying to arrange a safe place for everyone. The Navy no longer has a presence in Bekkie, and anyway, these people can be better trusted."

"So that's that, then." Saunders clasped his hands behind his back.

"What do you mean?"

"You're off to rescue your father."

Molly nodded. "I've been off to rescue my father for two months, Admiral. The flight out here from Bekkie was almost unbearable."

"I can imagine."

Molly started to tell him that he couldn't, but she saw the way he looked out over what remained of his crew. She knew he hadn't been with Zebra long, but it still must've felt like he'd lost a huge chunk of a very large family. She imagined he had known most of the younger crewmembers from their Academy days.

"So I guess you know what I'm going through."

Saunders nodded. He pulled her even further away from the blanket and the crowds forming around the supplies.

"I know why you need to go," he said. "I imagine if I were in your shoes, I'd be doing the exact same thing, and it would be a greater sin for me to do it. It would be my duty to stay here and help these people. It would be my duty to fight, even if it was futile. Hell, I absolved you of any of that responsibility the day I kicked you out of the Academy, didn't I?"

Saunders smiled, but it was laden with sadness.

"I was wrong about that," he said. "You might be the best damn pilot that ever set foot in that Academy."

"It's okay," Molly said.

Saunders shook his head. "It wasn't okay. It was part my fear of you, part my over-protectiveness, but mostly my love for those boys and how you made them feel about themselves."

"It's okay," Molly said. "I forgive you."

Saunders looked away and wiped at his eyes. "I better see to my people. You be good, okay?"

Molly stepped close and wrapped her arms around his waist. Saunders froze for a moment, then draped his own arms across her back. He squeezed her gently, and she could hear him sniffle. She pressed her cheek into his chest before pulling away. Without making

eye contact again—for fear of becoming a mess as well—she spun around and hurried toward *Parsona*.

"Hey," someone said to her side.

Molly turned to find Cat emerging from the supply line. She handed a large jug of water to another Callite and stepped out of the queue. "You weren't leaving without saying goodbye, were you?"

Molly shook her head and fought back the tears welling up in the bottoms of her eyes. "Never," she croaked.

"C'mere."

Cat pulled her close and wrapped her arms around Molly's shoulders. Molly kept one arm in front of herself so she could wipe the tears from her eyes.

"You're a good kid. You be sure and tell your pops I said that when you see him."

Molly nodded. "Watch over Urg's family for me, okay?"

"Hey. Stop that. You saved a lot of people, girl. Don't you go beating yourself up over the things you couldn't control. Take that from an expert."

Molly nodded. "I'll try."

"Alright. You go on, now." Cat let go and pushed her away. Molly practically ran back to the ship, past the long line of Navy crewmembers and Callites working together to prepare for whatever befell them next.

••••

Cat stood in place and watched her go. She marveled at how young the girl seemed as Molly stomped up the loading ramp and disappeared into that great starship. She thought about what she had just told her, and all the myriad more things she wished she had said.

"Among those you saved was me," Cat whispered to nobody.

••••

"You ready?" Parsona asked.

Molly checked the indicators. Everything was green. She had her welding goggles on her forehead, ready to slip down. The hyperdrive was cycled and the tank showed full. She looked over at Walter, who already had his goggles pulled into place. He was waving his hands in front of himself, hissing at the complete blackness.

"I guess," Molly said. She banked over the woods and did a low fly-by. It was getting dark, but she knew the survivors below could see

her silhouette against the stars—the stars and the glimmer of the menacing fleet that had brought the two groups together. She looked out her side porthole as *Parsona* leaned over, and she could see the strobe of so many small fires flashing through the leaves below. She pictured Saunders, Scottie, and Cat sitting around one of those fires, catching each other up as much as they dared. She hoped all the survivors could dig deep and find something to smile about, perhaps even dare laugh about. Most of all, she hoped they wouldn't try anything crazy while she was gone—or blame her too much for leaving them.

"Anytime you're ready, then," her mom said.

Molly lifted the cover that shields the hyperdrive switch. She rested her finger under the toggle and glanced at the destination coordinates. Any mass would do, but they weren't taking any chances and had chosen the center of Lok. It felt strange to ignore the various warning lights and alarms, but the sickness Molly felt inside about leaving the groups below made it tolerable. Deep down, she felt completely resigned to the worst that could possibly happen.

Before lowering her goggles, she took one last look up through the canopy. The scourge responsible for all her recent miseries hung overhead, the density of the constellation growing with each passing hour. Molly longed to strike at them, to morph her love for Cole into a rage, to transform her longing to see her father into an ability to lash out. She thought about what she would do with a cargo bay full of bombs and the special powers of her hyperdrive. She imagined how great it would be if all the survivors around those campfires below could harness their own enmity and somehow direct it toward their mutual foe—inflicting damage.

Molly ground her teeth together and lowered her goggles. She wished so many things were possible all at once.

"Is everything okay?" her mother asked.

Molly sat in the blackness provided by the goggles and held the ship level by her internal compass, by instinct. She felt the cool metal of the switch against the soreness in her scabbed fingertip. She thought about the hyperdrive it was linked to and how many people had risked their lives in trying to keep it secure. She thought about how many more would gladly do the same if they knew about its existence. She thought about Lucin and how desperate he had seemed to seize control of *Parsona*. Desperate enough to threaten her life. He had thought her father's ship, or something within it, could end a pan-galactic war.

Thinking of the war diverted her thoughts to the people below and to what she could really do with a full tank of the fusion fuel. Fusion fuel so many countless Humans and Callites had bled for. And

what was she about to spend it on? Rushing off, sad and desperate, to be with the only men in her life that ever made her feel safe?

"Sweetheart, what are you waiting for?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Activate the hyperdrive," Parsona said. "Sweetheart, hit the switch."

Molly put some pressure against the metal toggle and braced to jump to the middle of the planet, to purposefully whisk herself off to hyperspace. She felt the switch begin to give way—then she let it go. She rubbed the pads of her fingers together, the sensation deadened by her wounds.

"Molly, what in the galaxy are you doing?"

"I don't know, Mom. I'm sorry, I just don't know…"

"Don't know what?"

"I don't know if I can."

She pulled her hand away from the switch and lifted her goggles, dispelling the blackness. All around her was the flashing of indicators and alarms, the twinkling of stars overhead, the lambent flames from those huddled in the forest below. She felt in the middle of it all—surrounded by points of light each with their own messages: warning, pleading, threatening, begging, flanking her with indecision.

But there *was* no decision.

Despite her agonizing longing to be with Cole, the impossible thrill of reuniting with her father, she was bound by something stronger than military duty. Something Saunders could never absolve her from by expelling her, something the universe could not cull from her spirit.

It was her *nature*.

Molly grabbed the control stick and banked to starboard, back around to the clearing in the woods. Walter threw off his own goggles and hissed some question, but Molly didn't hear. She was too busy formulating a plan. Too busy dreaming of saving the universe…

Epilogue – The Blood of Billions

"Do we make our decisions? Or do they make us?"

~The Bern Seer~

"Okay, I think I've got it."

"Really?"

Cole wiggled out from underneath the cabinet and turned to the Seer. "Yeah, the flow of water's stopped, but it took all you had left of this caulk—"

"That's fine," she said, "I won't need any more."

"You can know things like that? That there won't be any more leaks?"

The Seer smiled. "Or that the next time, they'll be too much water to bother."

Cole crossed the swaying shack and placed the empty tube of caulk in the small trashcan. "Should I empty the pot of water under the leak? It's almost full."

"Sure." The Seer turned, her gaze following and approximating Cole's location. "Just dump it in the sink if you don't mind."

Cole pulled the pot out and sloshed it carefully into the small sink. Ahead of him, the wall of tin rattled with the sound of a billion drops of water thundering to their doom. Other than the direction from which the storm came, the entire scene reminded Cole of home. His *original* home, not the orphanage or the Academy, just that little shanty crowded by thousands of others in one of the poorest barrios of Portugal.

Standing in front of the sink with the empty pot in his hand, he sank into that recollection. There was nothing he had ever wanted more than to get out of that place. To see the world. To see the galaxy and all its finer things.

And now he had. He'd been to places few ever would. Seen things most people could only dream of. And somehow, standing in a shack that reminded him of his childhood, he felt more at ease, more comfortable, more *himself* than he had in years. The suddenness of the sensation hit him hard, making him gasp with awareness. No sooner had he felt that sense of peace, some bastard portion of his brain stabbed him with a reminder of where he was, how very far from home, how far from the one he cared so deeply for, and how impossible it may be to ever return.

He put the pot away, hanging it between a skillet and a wide pan. The three jangled together softly, almost as if greeting their returned friend.

"I guess that's that," Cole said, trying to force the shakiness out of his voice.

"Thank you," the Seer said. She folded her thin legs beneath

herself and gestured to the edge of the bed once more. Cole checked his hands, wiped a small bit of caulk on the front of his pants, then looked around at the rattling cabin.

"There anything else I can do for you?"

The Seer smiled. "Could I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

Cole took the few steps required to cross the room and plopped back onto the bed.

"Could you have not fixed the leak?" the Seer asked.

Cole glanced over his shoulder, back at the closed cabinet door. "Uh, I guess, but it didn't *seem* to be leaking. Should I put the pot back, just in case?"

The Seer smiled and shook her head. "No, what I mean is: do you think you could have *refused* to fix it? Could you have declined?"

"I—" Cole looked at his fingernails. He scratched at a fine line of dark caulk running along the edge of one. "Could I have refused," he said to himself.

The Seer sat quietly while he thought about it.

"I think so," Cole finally said. "If you had asked differently, or if I didn't feel so at home here, or maybe if I was in a bad mood—"

The Seer waved him off. "Forget what wasn't. I'm asking you, in the state you were in at that very moment, could you have said 'No?' Could you have refused?"

Something about the question irked Cole. It made him want to lie, to be argumentative. He wanted to say: "Yes, I could've chosen not to," but he couldn't. He couldn't because he knew, given a billion chances, if every event leading up to that choice was the same, he would've always done the favor for the old lady with the familiar eyes. And something about that knowledge made him bristle with anger. It put him in a state in which he probably would refuse if asked again.

"Can you not say?" the Seer asked.

He wondered which way she meant the question. Did she mean that he couldn't say because he didn't know? Or that he couldn't say because he chose not to? It irked him further. And he realized why: this was the same conversation he'd had with Molly a long time ago, back in the cockpit of their simulator. Only then, *he* had been the provocateur and *she* the annoyed. But now that Cole knew what the Seer was really talking about, the foam of anger fizzled away to be replaced with curiosity.

"You're asking about my free will, aren't you?"

The Seer smiled, but only a little. It was a smile filled with sadness, if such a thing could be. "I'm talking about *our* free will," she said. "Everyone's."

"Yes, I believe in free will."

As soon as Cole said it, the smile melted away, the wrinkles returning as the skin over her cheeks sagged back down, exposing that sadness beneath.

"You don't?" Cole asked.

"I'm not sure," the Seer said. "Or maybe I am, but I refuse to admit it. Maybe I *can't* admit it." The smile returned, wry and slanted. "I think about it a lot. More than anything else, probably. I see all these things that end up happening, as if they couldn't have gone otherwise. Some of them—a *lot* of them are bad things. And I wonder if they might not have happened, somehow."

"You have visions of the future? Is that why they call you the Seer?" Cole felt idiotic for asking, the answer so obvious, but he had a hard time buying the mystical aspects, even having recently seen so many strange things.

The Seer laughed. "See-*er*," she said. "The Bern see-*er*. I don't foretell the future, I just watch it." She waved one hand in a tiny circle. "But people hear it the way they want to, and that's how legends grow."

"You see the future? How is that possible?"

The woman shrugged. "Light and water do funny things in this place. Maybe I'm just seeing the reflections of things. Maybe the photons know what they'll bounce off of before they get there. I have a hundred theories and they all make me sound crazy. Some of them make me *feel* crazy. I know only enough about quantum mechanics to make it all seem like magic to me. Maybe I only see the things I want to see, or fear I'll see. Maybe *seeing* them makes it real." The Seer turned to the side, her jaw clenching and unclenching. "Maybe it *is* my fault."

She shook her head, her eyes remaining unfocused as she turned to the other side. Cole wondered if the looking about was habit, or if she was just diverting her ears from the echo of her admissions.

"I don't think you can blame yourself for stuff that hasn't happened yet," he told her.

"But I've said things," the Seer whispered. "Maybe that was enough. And to be honest, I've said things I knew were going to alter events. I've wrestled with that, but I don't see a different outcome. I don't see anything I could've chosen otherwise."

"Is that why you don't believe in free will? To protect yourself?"

"No." The Seer shook her head. "Nothing feels safe about a lack of free will, about being out of control. The reason I don't believe in free will is because of—because of so many things." The Seer rubbed the back of her hand, the agitation apparent in the rise of her tone. "Why are people unhappy much of the time? Why would they *choose* to be

miserable if they are truly free? Why do we repeat the same mistakes over and over and wallow in our regret? Why does it feel like my every action is really a reaction, and that I only *afterwards* rationalize my behavior as having been a conscious decision?"

Cole leaned back, away from the words. They seemed sharp and dangerous, laced with barbs that could wiggle in and never come back out. Not without pain, anyway.

"If there's no free will," he said, "then what are we? Automatons? Organisms just responding to environmental cues?" He shook his head. "No thanks. If we aren't free to choose our paths, we should at the very least pretend."

The Seer frowned. "We should lie to ourselves. Is that what you're saying?"

Cole nodded, forgetting for a moment that the woman was blind. "I think that's what I do. I think I know what you know, but I avoid it." Cole glanced over his shoulder. "I don't think I could've chosen to not fix that leak. I'm sure of it, actually. The state I was in, what was going on around me, I had already agreed to fix it before you asked. If you could see those things, see inside me, I think you'd know the future."

"That's what I'm afraid of," the Seer said sadly. She looked away, or at least turned her head. "Religions have long wrestled with this, you know. Their best argument is that we are free to choose, but god already knows how we will. He knows us, knows what actions we will perform, long before we do."

"I'm familiar with the argument," said Cole.

"Maybe there's something good about it." She turned to face him. "Would you ever want to be the kind of person who would *refuse* to fix the leak?"

"No."

"Neither would I. And maybe that determines who believes in free will and who doesn't. Maybe those of us who are ashamed of our actions like to think it doesn't exist. And those of *you* who live without regret like to take the credit for yourselves."

"I have plenty of regrets," Cole said softly.

"I know. But perhaps not more than your pride."

The lady looked down at her hands, or at least appeared to. She flexed her fingers and Cole wondered if she could imagine them there as ghost limbs visible in her awareness of where her body was in space. He closed his own eyes and tried to picture his hands in his lap, and then realized there was nothing rude in the gesture. He could lie back with his eyes closed and continue talking, and she would never know. She probably wouldn't care even if she did. Something about it, about being invisible and making the rest of the world disappear, felt

nice.

When he opened his eyes, hers were back to pointing in his general direction. Cole realized, just then, how very much he liked this old woman, even though he knew nothing of her or her intentions.

"Are you human?" he asked, his mouth blurting it out before his brain could filter it.

"Yes."

"What's your real name?"

"I can't say."

"Can't, or won't?"

"If I did, I'd be naming myself, so I'll leave it up to you." She smiled, as if at some private joke, but there was still some sadness in her face. Each flash of happiness contained some hint that it could be her last, like a creature rare and therefore tragic.

"I need you to pass on something to Mortimor for me."

"Sure."

"Tell him to get everyone out."

"Just say that? He'll know what that means?"

The Seer nodded.

"Out of hyperspace?"

She shrugged.

"Is there a way out?"

"If there is, I'm sure you'll figure it out. If you try hard enough. Just tell him to leave no one behind."

"Okay."

They sat in silence for a moment. Cole thought the woman looked tired all of a sudden, like she needed to lie down and never get back up.

"Is that it, then?"

The Seer nodded. "You've been a tremendous help."

Cole laughed. "It wasn't so bad a leak," he said.

"I meant the other. About lying to ourselves. I think you're right about that…"

The Seer trailed off and Cole waited in silence.

"If we aren't free," she finally said, "I think you're right to *pretend* we are. Maybe we have to delude ourselves and not feel bad for doing it. Maybe that's crucial for our sanity."

"Lying to ourselves?"

"And each other. If not, if we admit that we aren't free and in control of our own behavior, we won't hold ourselves responsible for our actions, and that will *surely* have an effect on them." The Seer lifted her hands from her lap, holding them out as if for balance, even though the cabin wasn't swaying at the moment.

“That’s *it*,” she whispered. “That’s the answer.”

She said it reverently and to herself, almost as if she’d been expecting it to come. Her hands came together, interlocking. They came up and covered her mouth, her eyes glistening with a film of tears. She looked down at the empty space of bed between herself and Cole. He didn’t dare speak, didn’t dare interrupt whatever was happening.

“Everything we do affects the people around us,” she finally said. “We are a *part* of each other’s environment. How I ask you to fix the leak has more to do with your decision than *you* do. Our will isn’t free, but it depends on each other. It—maybe it’s so complex that some kind of randomness is possible. Some emergent quality arises as all the interactions bounce off one another.”

She looked up, her hands returning to her lap, her silence inviting some kind of response.

But Cole was too busy thinking to answer. He saw what she meant, saw the implications. The mass delusion of free will wasn’t just to assuage, the very *idea* of free will seemed to inject some of it into human behavior. By expecting others to choose the best course—by holding them responsible for their actions afterwards—it made it more likely they *would* choose best.

“Thank you for coming,” the Bern Seer said. She unfolded her legs from beneath her and swung them over the side of the bed, planting her feet. She held up her arms as if asking for help to stand. Cole scrambled off the bed and reached for her, helping her up.

“It was my pleasure,” he said, honestly meaning it.

The Seer crossed to the door and rested a fragile hand on the knob. “Let me know when you have your goggles on.”

Cole fumbled for them; he pulled them from around his neck and hurriedly wiped the cups with his t-shirt, having learned how important it was to not have to adjust them once outside.

“Will I see you again?” he asked.

“In a way,” she said.

Cole pulled the goggles down over his head, adjusting them until the cups were tight and his world was as black as blindness.

“Thank you again,” the Seer said. “I think you’ve helped me take responsibility for what I’m about to do.”

In the pure darkness, Cole noticed for the first time that her voice didn’t match her appearance. It was young and crisp, not worn out the way her body appeared.

“And what is that?” Cole asked. He stood in an unseeing void, having forgotten she was waiting to hear when his goggles were in place.

“One day, I’ll have to push a button,” she said, “and by pushing

it, I'll change everything about this universe. And I'm afraid I already know how I will choose."

"Why are you afraid?" Cole asked, growing wary of the blackness.

"Because, a lot of blood will be spilled, and it'll all be on my hands."

"Blood?" A shiver ran up Cole's spine. He felt a sudden and powerful impulse to tear off his goggles. "*Whose* blood?" he asked.

"Everyone's," the Bern Seer said. "The blood of billions."